

UNDERSTANDING OTHER CULTURES: THE VALUE ORIENTATIONS METHOD

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Introduction

The 2000 census has documented the common knowledge that the United States is becoming an ever more multicultural nation. This fundamental shift in demographics challenges organizations to make their programs relevant and accessible to people from outside the dominant culture. But for organizations to change, people that make up the organization need to change and that requires new perceptions and understandings. How can those in the dominant Western culture understand better the assumptions of people from another culture -- so that they have the understanding necessary to adapt their organizations to serve more effectively across cultures?

This paper presents a tool -- the Value Orientations Method (VOM) -- that provides insight into the core assumptions, called value orientations, of other cultures. The VOM helps to articulate how other cultures are different from the dominant Western culture. For those who are familiar with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and how it describes types of individuals, the VOM provides a similar method for describing types of cultures.

In this paper I review the history and conceptual foundation for the VOM; provide an overview of applications in higher education, health care, and management; briefly introduce the assessment instruments now available; and, discuss linkages of the VOM with the MBTI and with organizational culture. The paper concludes with a proposal to "find the middle ground" in making organizations more accessible to people from outside the dominant culture.

History and Concept

In the 1940s, anthropologists Florence and Clyde Kluckhohn and Frederick Strodbeck, with the Harvard Values Project, began an exploration of the fundamental values held by different cultures. They hypothesized that

"...there are a limited number of common human problems for which all societies at all times must find some solution...How a group is predisposed to understand, give meaning to, and solve these common problems is an outward manifestation of its innermost values, its window on the world: its value orientation." The five common human problems, posed as questions, that provided the most useful "value orientations" in creating a cultural typology were:

- What is the temporal focus of life? (**Time** orientation)
- What is the modality of human activity? (**Activity** orientation)
- What is the modality of a person's relationship to others in the group? (**Relations** orientation)
- What is the relationship of people to nature? (**Person-nature** orientation)
- What is the character of innate human nature? (**Human nature** orientation)

Their "Rimrock Study" in the American Southwest compared a Mexican American village, a Navaho Indian band, a Zuni pueblo, a Mormon community, and a Texan community. From their research they deduced that societies would respond in one of three ways to each of the five questions or orientations (figure 1). (A complete review of this research was published by Vogt and Albert in 1996.)

Figure 1

ORIENTATIONS	POSSIBLE DIMENSIONS		
Time	Past	Present	Future
Activity	Doing	Becoming	Being
Relations	Individual	Collateral	Lineal
Person-Nature	Humans dominant	Harmony with	Nature Dominant
Human Nature	Good	Mixed	Evil

The "value orientations" chosen by the team recognized that the responses were not values per se, but the foundation assumptions or orientations upon which a culture builds its value system. For example, a society that has a preferred "past" time orientation might express a high value for traditional ways, drawing on the past for its present values, and quite probably valuing

elders who carry that knowledge. Conversely, a society with a preferred "future" orientation would more likely draw its values from what will serve to shape the future and would more likely value planning future options.

In 1961, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck published their theory and findings in their book, *Variations in Value Orientations*, in which they proposed that the rank-order of preference -- from most to least -- gave the society its cultural character. The different patterns of rankings allowed one culture to be distinguished from other cultures. It was this rank-order of preferences, they argued, that was the foundation for the more-visible cultural values, beliefs, norms, and actions -- and even heroes, rituals, songs, etc. -- of the society. They also proposed that, although a society may have a general preference that is dominant, there is a great deal of diversity within cultures and all cultures will express all possible dimensions at some time or through some individuals. Carter (1990) added to these propositions with his finding that cultures could share the same rank order of dimensions, but differ substantially if there was relative difference of preference for each of the dimensions.

Recent Research and Applications

Following Florence Kluckhohn's death in 1986, her colleagues founded the Kluckhohn Center for the Study of Values in Bellingham, WA. The Center gathered a group of about a dozen scholars from various disciplines to continue research on the VOM, including expanding the theory, perfecting the assessment instruments, and documenting new applications. Over the past decade a number of researchers have applied the method to various situations; presented here are higher education, health care, and management.

Higher Education

In education, Ortuno (1991) demonstrated how the VOM provides college students, in her case students in language courses, with the necessary insight into cultural differences to interpret literary works from different cultures. She writes about how she used the VOM to help in the classroom: *"The typical language student, exposed haphazardly to ... different cultural values, be it through culture capsules in an elementary grammar text or through an anthology of literature, does not usually have a systematic way of interpreting this information. The Kluckhohn (VOM) taxonomy of value orientations provides just such a means of evaluating and understanding the significance of cultural differences within a wider, global context."* Ortuno's research, including a paper published in 2000 (Ortuno 2000), provides highly useful description of Anglo/Hispanic cultural differences that would apply outside of higher education.

Carter explored the "cultural value differences between African Americans and White Americans" in a paper with that title (Carter 1990a). His research demonstrated that both groups rank-order the preferences for each of the five value orientations in the same way, but that there are distinct differences in the relative preferences for each orientation. These differences, he proposed, can lead to a number of subtle problems in higher education for African American students interacting with a primarily Anglo/Western institution. He writes that his findings *"...suggest that African-American college students may experience the environments in higher educational institutions as hostile and unfamiliar...When differences in cultural values exist, interpersonal or intergroup relationships might be subject to more anxiety and frustration.* Carter's work, although limited to students, is useful in understanding African American and White American cultural differences in general.

In another study related to education, Chapman (1993) identified three general benefits of using the VOM as a foundation for graduate education. First, she found that students who grew up in a mono-cultural environment often had an "ah-ah" experience (author's words) when they discovered their own world-view, and that others did not share it. Second, she found that students exposed to the VOM could use the insights to increase their ability to reduce conflict. And, third she found that those students with a preference for science and facts could incorporate different world-views into their thinking by using the VOM.

In student counseling, Remer and Remer (1982) used the VOM to categorize counseling theories so that counselors might use the best counseling method with clients from different cultures.

Health Care

The VOM has also been the subject of applied research in several aspects of health care. Ponce (1985), a professor of psychiatry, demonstrated the value of the VOM as a *"... conceptual method of understanding culture that is relatively simple and useful -- a method that is complementary to, and can be easily integrated with, other clinical constructs and approaches."* Working in the multi-cultural environment of Hawaii, Ponce more recently (2000) has demonstrated the use of the VOM in individual psychotherapy, marital and family therapy, group therapy, and mediation.

Brink, an academic nurse, has used the VOM to understand cultural values and reduce conflict in clinical settings. In particular, she has used the VOM to improve relations between Canada's indigenous, First Nations, people and modern medical institutions (Brink 1984). She also applied the VOM to medical treatment among the Annang of Nigeria (Brink 2000). Her research has provided the foundation for more sensitive cross-cultural

medical treatment. For example, medical professionals trained using the VOM have been better able to respond to the medical needs of indigenous people by being aware of such norms as having family member present during decision making about treatment, or even about having a "shaman" present during a treatment.

A final health example is provided by Papajohn (1971) who has described how culture is a variable that can cause personal stress. Working with Greek-Americans in Boston, Papajohn explains: "*Among Greek-American males who have achieved middle-class status, those who are the most "Americanized" evidence a precarious psychological balance. The drive to achieve and to maintain a high level of work performance appears to be a continuing source of strain. They obviously possess greater psychological resources, but these are being sorely tested by the stresses they experience by the culture change incumbent on "making it" in American society.*" This "stress during enculturation" is thought to impact people of all cultures who must give up their past ways to join another culture (Kohls 1996). In response to this culture-induced stress Papajohn and Spielgel (2000) developed an Ethnicity Training Program with a National Institute of Mental Health grant that is used in the Harvard Medical School.

Management

The VOM is increasingly referenced as a valuable element in cross-cultural management training (Harris and Moran 1991, Kohls 1996). The Kluckhohn Center for the Study of Values as applied the model to several management situations involving serious cross-cultural conflict. Zubalik and Russo (1988) used the VOM in the introductory workshop for resolution of a long-standing conflict between the Lummi Tribe and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources. The conflict, about management of Native lands with spiritual values, was resolved and has produced a long-standing working relationship between the two groups (Russo 2000b).

In a previous paper, Gallagher (2000a), I describe how the VOM functions in conflict resolution to clarify often hidden differences. In conflict resolution, the VOM helps both parties to understand their own values, and those of the "other". For example, a person from a "doing" culture may find a person from a "being" culture difficult or lazy. Conversely, a person from a culture that prefers "being" may find a person from a "doing" culture excessively anxious and demanding. Training with the VOM helps people on both sides of a conflict understand the foundation assumptions they make "about how the world should work" and how they expect others to follow their norms.. With knowledge of themselves and of the "other" participants in a conflict can refrain from misattribution of meaning and intent and better address the real conflict (Gallagher 1992).

In the world of business, Maznevski, Nason and DiStefano (1993) offered the VOM as a "... new instrument for understanding cultural differences... *The disappearance of political boundaries for the purpose of trade marks a new era in international business: the promise of operating in large regions as if they were single markets is enticing. As managers are discovering, though, there are a few catches. In particular, ethnic cultural differences cannot be negotiated away in the same manner as political borders.* They note that "...Canadian and American managers in Mexico, Korean managers in Malaysia, and German and French managers in Spain have all discovered that cultural differences are more prevalent and more difficult to manage than anticipated." They conclude that a) the theory helps to diagnose cultural differences in their organizations and to increase awareness of cultural diversity, and b) once cultural understandings are developed managers will be able to use diverse perspectives productively in their organizations.

Instruments

The original assessment instrument, called the Value Orientations Survey, consists of 23 oral questions. The "questions" begin with a situation or story that provides the basis for questions that elicit respondent's preferences. The modern oral instrument, which has incrementally been updated and adapted, and discussion of issues of analysis of data, are found in Russo (2000a). (A users manual and computer-based scoring program are available from the Kluckhohn Center [www.frkvalues.org]). Figure 2 presents one question from the instrument that concerns the "time" orientation. Note that this instrument is administered orally so the question is read to the respondent, even if they could read it easily.

Figure 2

Some people were talking about the way that children should be brought up. Here are three different ideas:

1. Some people say that children should always be taught the traditions of the past. They believe the old ways are best, and it is when children do not follow them that things go wrong. (A)
2. Some people say that children should be taught some of the old traditions, but it is wrong to insist that they stick to these ways. These people believe that it is necessary for children to always learn about and take on whatever of the new ways will best help them get along in the world of today. (B)
3. Some people do not believe children should be taught much about the past traditions at all, except as an interesting story of what has gone before. These people believe that the world goes along best when

children are taught the things that will make them want to find out for themselves new ways of doing things to replace the old. (C)

Which of these people has the best idea about how children should be taught? [Your answer: _____]

Which of these people has the next best idea? [Your answer: _____]

Which of the three ways would most other people in _____ (your family, group, or community) say is best? [Your answer: _____]

Which of the three ways would most _____ (people in another group, community, or cultural group) say is best? [Your answer: _____]

(Orientations: A = past, B = present, C = future)

The first two questions identify the respondent's three preferences in rank order. The third question provides information about whether the respondent is similar to a larger group. The fourth question is useful in conflict resolution where each side projects what they think the "other" would answer. Group comparison of responses to these questions, in particular too the fourth question, is often an effective first step in conflict resolution.

Several written instruments have been developed recently. Carter and Helms (1990) developed their Inter-cultural Values Inventory (ICV) using 150 short statements such as "Hard work never hurt anyone". Respondents answer "yes" or "no" to the question. Maznevski, DiStefano and Nason (1995) developed a second written instrument that uses 79 statements, such as "Anyone's basic nature can change", to which respondents agree or disagree on a 7-point Likert scale. Both instruments are available from the authors.

None of the instruments is easy to use and interpret without training. Rather, like the more-formal MBTI instruments, correct and effective use requires training (which is provided by the Kluckhohn Center). However, experience shows that simply reviewing the logic of the VOM with people, and reviewing the instruments, often provides the desired insight to cultural differences.

Linkages

Linking the VOM and the MBTI: The theory that underlies the MBTI posits that the dimensions of individual differences -- the perceiving and judging functions -- are universal and cross-cultural. It does not follow,

however, that all cultures will express the same proportion of type preferences. For instance, some cultures may emphasize the judging function, perhaps because of norms carried by their religious belief system. Thus, a higher percentage of the members of that society may grow up with an expressed, if not innate, preference for judging over perceiving. In providing this larger context, the VOM serves as a way to understand the "box" that the MBTI operates within for any given culture.

A quick comparison of the two theories -- VOM and MBTI -- suggests that there should be a correlation between several VOM preferences and MBTI types. For example, the "SJ" individual in the MBTI typology, who Keirsey (1998) refers to as the "Guardian", is conservative about change and prefers to bring forward the traditions and values of the past to make today's decisions. Theory suggests that individuals with strong Guardian values might also have a strong "past" orientation as described in the VOM typology. Further, cultures dominated by SJs would likely build institutions that express their values. This is not to say that one causes the other, but rather that one can expect scores for individuals on the VOM to correlate with scores on the MBTI.

Linking the VOM and the organization: In addition to helping to understand the cultural context in which the individual lives, the VOM can help to understand organizations, which are built by people -- individually and in groups -- to serve their purposes. About this service, Carter (2000) writes: *"Each organization in our society is embedded in the dominant cultural patterns of our societal culture...Whites have been the dominant racial and cultural group in North American society. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture has been at the core of American cultural patterns...some of the dimensions that characterize white American culture are rugged individualism, an action orientation measured by external accomplishments, a majority-rule decision-making system when whites are in power -- otherwise, a hierarchical structure is used, a communication system that relies on written and "standard" English forms, a view of time as a commodity and future oriented, a religious system primarily based on Christian ideals, social customs (e.g. holidays) founded on and celebrations of the Christian religion, white Euro-American history and male leaders, a patriarchal family system center on the nuclear family structure as the idea social unit, and aesthetic qualities that emphasize the value of music and art based on European cultures."*

We can see in our organizations a variety of expressions of the dominant Western culture. For example, the Western orientation to time -- Time is money! Get to work on time! -- is expressed in the norms of our public and private organizations. There are few American organizations that do not establish times to be opened and closed; times for workers to arrive, take a break, have lunch, and depart; and times for such rituals as evaluations,

birthday lunches and annual picnics. Hence, when people of a culture with a different sense of time -- e.g. a past orientation where the clock is of little value -- interact with a Western organization there can be conflict. When a cultural group doesn't share the core values embedded in the organization the effect is that they cannot effectively interact with the organization -- and the value of the organization, as a job or service provider, may be lost. Conversely, Western people are not very effective when they interact with traditional organizations, such as a tribal council.

The value orientations of our organizations will be expressed in such systemic organizational functions as leadership, decision making, communication, motivation and control. Looking at the function of leadership and the time orientation, for example, a future-oriented leader (typical in Western culture) tends to focus on establishing a vision and on strategic planning. This leader probably talks about breaking "out of the box" and has established objectives and due dates. The past-oriented leader (more typical of a traditional cultures) tends to focus on drawing values and affective strategies for action in the future from the past. This leader tends to avoid formal planning, preferring "to respond to the world as it unfolds" (a phrase heard among Alaska's Native people). Similarly, the management functions of decision making, communication, motivation and controls vary across organizations, depending on the cultures. Details of these linkages are necessarily saved for a later paper.

Conclusion

If we understand each other better, across cultures, we can better avoid conflict and work through our differences. This is not to say that conflict resolution is easy (even with full understanding) but that ignorance of, or misattribution of another's values and motives, cannot possibly aid conflict resolution. To better understand each other, however, we need useful insights -- the VOM provides this insight. It helps us to understand ourselves at a new, deeper level, and it helps us to understand others.

And perhaps as important, the VOM can help us understand our organizations and provide us with some guidance on how to make them more accessible to people from other cultures. This is not to say that we should change our organizations outright to fit others, but that we should explore "a third way" to do business. The challenge, as Russo (2000), the Director of the Kluckohn Center states, is to "find the middle ground". The middle ground is not necessarily half Western and half "other" (particularly as there are many "others") but rather a new way of interacting that provides greater opportunity for clear communication and identifying and resolving conflicts. (For an example beyond the scope of this paper see Gallagher 1999.)

In sum, the VOM, although developed before the 1960s, has taken on a new value in the multicultural world we live in today. Just as the MBTI has helped us understand individual differences, so the VOM offers the potential to understand cultural differences.

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