

Power Distance and Discipleship in a Missionary's Role:

How do you find out what your national Christian brother is really thinking?

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I. What is culture?

- A. The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization, or group – Wikipedia

Every language group, social group, even business and community has a culture, many times shared with others, but many times distinct. We can talk about a corporate culture of a particular company, the culture of a region of a country, the culture of a segment of society, as well as the culture of a country or language group.

- B. William Smallman, Teaching Cross-Culturally diagram p. 23
(Notes from seminar held at Bibles International , August 2011)



II. What relationship will you have with your national brothers and sisters?

A. Language and culture learner

The newcomer missionary will need to learn about the cultural dos and don'ts from other missionaries or from the nationals. The problem with the nationals is that they are so naturally adept at their culture that they will not recognize their differences, and will generally not be able to explain the differences. The more reliable guide is other experienced missionaries. Also, in learning language from a national language helper, the learner must to some extent be the teacher as well, since the language helper may not be able to explain things about his or her own language to the satisfaction of the missionary.

B. Employer

Many times missionaries need to employ national helpers in the home because of their need to devote more time to language learning or ministry responsibilities rather than the mundane things that the national can do better, such as go to the market. But the national will not know how to fix food in the way the missionary is used to, either recipes or cleanliness standards, so the missionary must find a way to communicate their expectations without offending the national (This is not an area I am particularly expert in, but it is important to talk to other missionaries about the ways to communicate such practical matters). Also, the national helper will have full access to the home and materials of the missionary in many cases, and a too familiar attitude may lead the national to believe he or she is part of the family and therefore able to take what she or he may need like they would in their own homes.

A distressing trend in certain mission fields is for a national who is leaving the employ of a missionary or mission office to sue the missionary for additional benefits that the national feels are his or her due beyond the pay they have received. The courts in these countries are generally favorable to the national, no matter how frivolous the case may appear to the missionary or the agency back home. This is a difficult problem that the mission community needs to address as a collective whole, so as to prepare for this kind of possibility.

C. Benefactor-provider

Because the missionary has ministry funds and access to support and help for large projects, the nationals may view the missionary as a source of financial benefits, and most missionaries have regular contacts who show up for help in various ways. The book by Glenn Schwartz on this subject is good to read and consider. It is also important to know that in some cultures, such as African countries, to ask for money is a kind of compliment to the greatness of the person being approached, and may in fact not be a true request for money. The African culture furthermore very much hinges on such types of generosity between relationships, and a person who is in debt to many people is actually thought of as someone with many powerful friends (see *African Friends and Money Matters*).

D. Advocate

The newcomer missionary may be selected to hear the requests that the nationals have made before to other missionaries, since the newcomer does not know all the background. The newcomer may feel responsibility to respond favorably as a sign of the fact that they are indeed concerned for the national brothers. A flat refusal is rude, and a suggestion that the missionary will look into it or pray about it may be viewed by the national as a subtle agreement to actually grant the request. The newcomer needs to be very non-committal while not being completely negative, so as to buy time to investigate the particular request. The other appropriate way to respond is to inform the national that you are not the one to respond to that request, and that the national should talk to “so-and-so” among the other missionaries, as that person has the responsibility to responsibility to respond.

E. Teacher roles

The missionary is viewed in societies with high value for power distance as a powerful person, someone able to make changes and bring about desired ends. The missionary in his or her teaching will take a certain type of role, and these vary quite a bit from society to society. The way the society views people like teachers will determine what kind of relationship the missionary will have in many ways to their Christian brothers and sisters.

1. Teacher as patron/parent

This role is a relational one, in which the teacher is regarded as the guardian for the student, the one who will see to the well-being of the student, not only by teaching truth, but also by providing for the needs of the student, whatever they may be. Since knowledge is power, the teacher guards knowledge and does not give it out except to those who are their “children,” so to speak.

2. Teacher as authority

This is the traditional view of the teacher in most cultures, and it assumes a distance and power differential between teacher and student, something not completely desirable in the Christian setting, where each person is to be fully persuaded in their own mind. When the teacher is the authority, the student simply listens and memorizes; independent thinking is neither fostered nor desired.

3. Teacher as outsider

Missionaries sometimes find when they come into a new place of service, where they are unknown, they are already labeled in certain ways because of past experiences with others they are automatically identified with, whether they want it or not. This role is somewhat like the substitute teacher who comes in when the well-liked teacher is sick or gone for an extended time. The students resent the teacher, not because of who he or she is, but because who she is not. In such a case the missionary must form a new relationship while proving himself not to be like the former person.

4. Teacher as facilitator

This is the role we most often think of in the West for a teacher, and fits the biblical model better in certain ways. The teacher is there to help and guide, but not dictate. The teacher searches for the answer like the student does, and wishes to show the student how to find out the information himself or herself. This role is the one I have most often assumed in Bible translation consultation.

III. Types of societies

A. Consensus vs. majority

The US is a majority society where who has the majority gets to decide, but many societies in the world are consensus societies, where everyone gets to be heard, and the final decision is one that all have come to agree with.

B. Egalitarian, hierarchical, communal society

An egalitarian society expects everyone to be treated the same, but a hierarchical society accepts that some people can go to the head of the line and not have to wait. A communal society rejects the idea of individual decisions and beliefs, and expects all to know everything. Someone who wishes to be alone or does not share information, or plans things, is probably planning something bad, and is in general up to no good.

C. Attitudes toward time

Western society runs on time and is “on time.” Schedules are meant to be kept, and delays are apologized for. In Africa, time is very flexible, and relationships with others are more important than time. An African visiting the US told our mission office staff: “You Americans are rich in everything except time. You are poor in time; you don’t take time for people.”

IV. Cultural dimensions – Hofstede model

A. Five dimensions (from <http://geert-hofstede.com/dimensions.html>)

1. Power Distance (PDI)

This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalise the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power.

2. Individualism versus collectivism (IDV)

The high side of this dimension, called Individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. Its opposite, Collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of "I" or "we."

3. Masculinity versus femininity (MAS)

The masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material reward for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented.

4. Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)

The uncertainty avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries exhibiting strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.

5. Long-term versus short-term orientation (LTO)

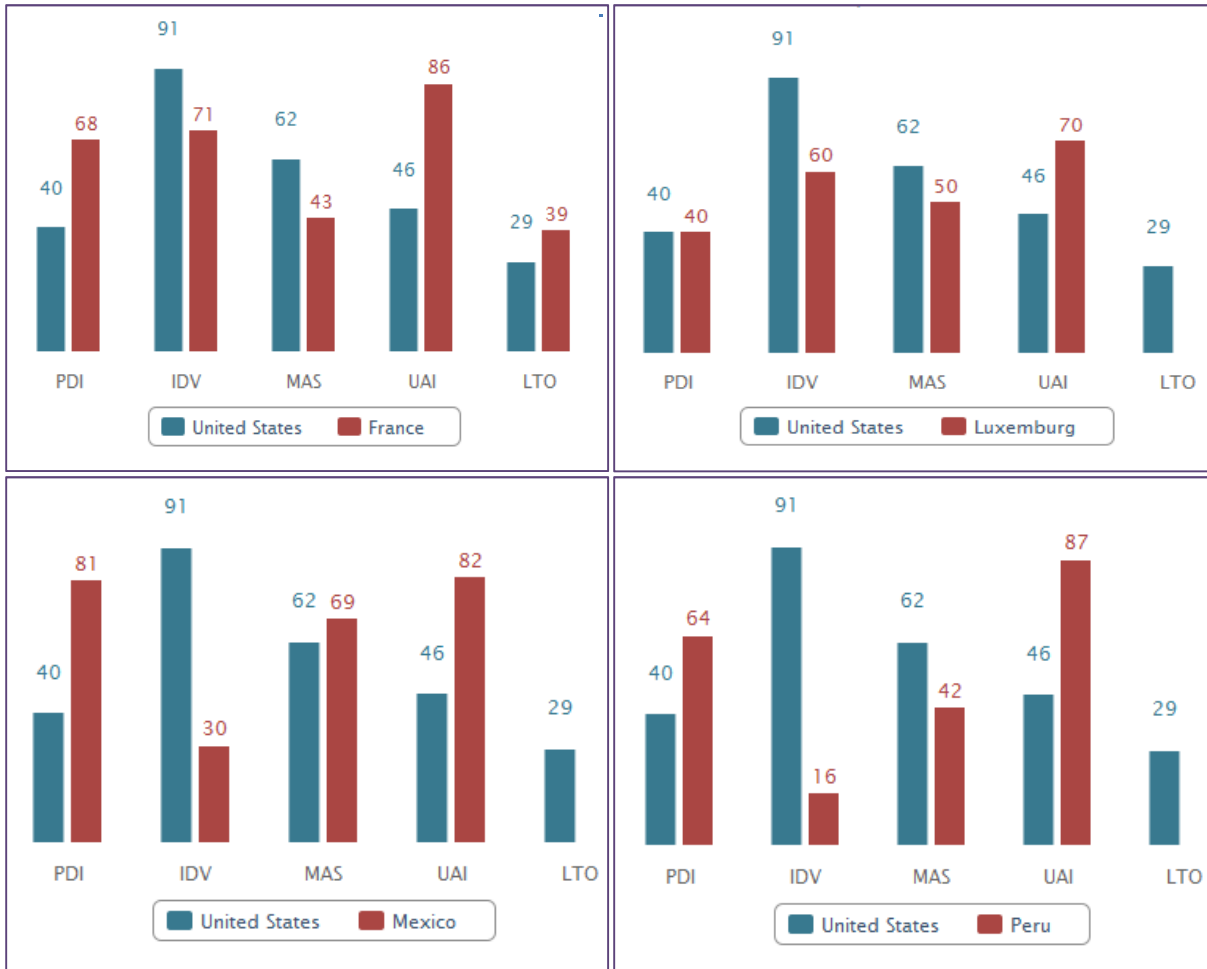
The long-term orientation dimension can be interpreted as dealing with society's search for virtue. Societies with a short-term orientation generally have a strong concern with establishing the absolute Truth. They are normative in their thinking. They exhibit great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. In societies with a long-term orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time. They show an ability to adapt traditions to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.

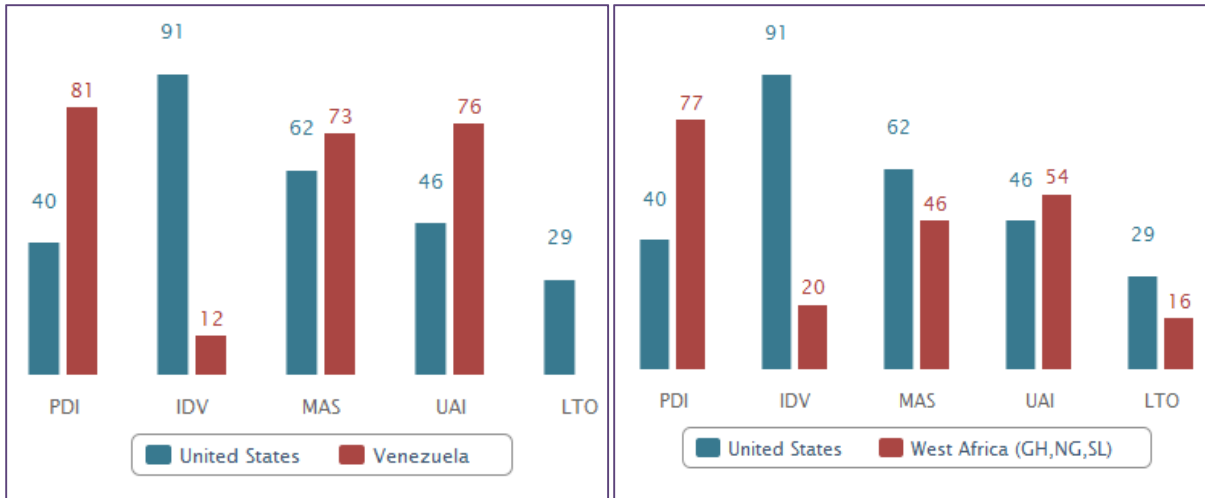
B. Countries with the most/the least

PDI	Malaysia-104	Austria-11
IDV	United States-91	Guatemala-6

MAS	Slovakia-110	Sweden-5
UAI	Greece-112	Singapore-8
LTO	China-118	Czech Republic-13

C. Comparison of countries with the US





V. 1 Cor. 9:19-23 (discussions issues)

- A. How does this fit with being “not ashamed of the Gospel”?
- B. Is the Bible to be understood culturally or on the basis of unchanging principles?
- C. Confrontation concerning sin, church discipline, treatment of women and children, honesty, fiscal responsibility, and more

Recommended Reading

Elmer, Duane. *Cross-cultural conflict : building relationships for effective ministry*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Maranz, David. *African friends and Money Matters*. Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2001.

Schwartz, Glenn. *When Charity Destroys Dignity : Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement*. Lancaster, Pa.: World Mission Associates; Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2007.

Storti, Craig. *Speaking of India: Bridging the Communication Gap when Working with Indians*. Boston: Intercultural Press, 2007.

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