

Managing Mindsets

An appreciative inquiry¹ into cultural differences

By Mijnd Huijser

What is so special about an appreciative inquiry?

How will an appreciative inquiry help us to better understand cultural differences?

I would like to make that clear by using a simplified example. Suppose you have to make a report for the UN about the economic situation in a war-torn country. You discover no export, import, or industrial activities remain anywhere. The only commercial activities you detect are unofficial markets in the cities and people in villages surviving on just a family vegetable garden and a cow. Your data is gathered through questionnaires, in which you asked whether people are employed, have savings, do business or conceive agricultural planning. Given the questionnaire responses, you will probably conclude: they are living in absolute poverty. However, if you appreciate what people tell you, what you can see happening, what is not in your questionnaire, you may come to another conclusion. People trade tomatoes against shoes; teachers educate children for free lodgings. There is a certain level of welfare in this country, and people are not starving. This, however, does not fit in a questionnaire made up by people who refer to a completely different economic context. Based on the report from the questionnaire, the UN may advise sending help to that country in the form of relief goods. Based on the appreciative inquiry, they may choose to send advisors right away and start financial investment to develop what has been successfully started.

In this article I will use the appreciative inquiry to discover *the other* social reality – the one that escapes questionnaires. In this social reality we discover cultural central tendencies that can serve as a reference framework. Knowing the context to which people refer, we will be able to better understand what they mean; similar to what happened in the above example. I will show that it is a powerful method to reconcile seemingly conflicting outcomes of *traditional* research into cultural differences.

The *traditional* methods used to map cultural differences seem to have the same flaw as the method in our example of the UN report and may lead to similar, inadequate advice. Information, questions and answers, are put into a language, and language never is culturally neutral. Language is one of the most important features in which a culture is expressed. Words receive their meaning from a specific cultural context, and this context is not taken into account in the analysis of the data. The context is not even known other than through the interpretation of the researcher and is probably influenced by his personal cultural orientation. In our appreciative inquiry we inform ourselves about the fundamentals of the different cultural contexts. In this way we hope to understand better what people mean when they fill out questionnaires referring to another cultural orientation.

Nowhere is found a more lively controversy than between parties who disagree yet are both convinced they are right. Their conviction is often supported by rational arguments and leads to a strong belief in the position they defend. They may even personally identify with their conviction and become deeply emotionally involved. Their position defines their perception of reality – this is how it really is, the only acceptable and true reality. Conflict and ineffectively directed energy are the only outcomes of such controversies.

Thomas Kuhn² argued that even scientific theories and paradigms turn out to be belief-systems, emotionally defended by their adherents. A belief-system is a theory or an idea supported by (empirical) proof that is accepted as evidence for the theory by its adherents only. Even after new and more powerful scientific theories are developed, the “club of believers” will continue to defend its view

on reality. Mostly it is time that solves the dispute; after the defenders of one theory ultimately pass away, the survivors take all.

Differing realities

Two gurus run the “Research into cultural differences” show.

Geert Hofstede³ and Fons Trompenaars⁴. Both are scientists and live in controversy. Hofstede was the first to engage in worldwide research, quantifying cultural value differences. This research was done within IBM, in the late sixties and early seventies.

Hofstede believes in his data, which was mainly gathered through questionnaires. His data are solid and static. Hofstede’s cultural reality is as solid as his data. His definition of a culture is based on its differences with other cultures. Although Hofstede admits that cultures do develop, he repeatedly states that the differences between cultures change little and the old data keep their applicability.

Trompenaars also believes in the validity of his data, which is frequently updated through his questionnaires. Although he states that the answers have to be understood as a starting point for a learning process, he uses his databank as a resource of meaningful indicators of cultural preferences. Unlike Hofstede however, Trompenaars’s cultural reality is a process, never fixed.

Both scientists have done valuable research. In this article I attempt to enhance the meaning of their data through a linkage with the lacking context. I take an approach to cultural inquiry that is different from Trompenaars’s or Hofstede’s *measuring cultural preferences* with the help of questionnaires. Questionnaires can be better understood, as discussed above, if we recognize the context to which the reader referred unconsciously when filling it out. We believe that we can construct a framework in which these data find their specific meaning. Our approach owes a lot to the appreciative inquiry as a methodology. It is an approach based on strengths rather than weaknesses, on a positive angle rather than on what does not work well. People tend to mentally focus on what is lacking to improve a situation, not on how to develop what already proved to work well. We will therefore not ask people what choice they would make in a certain problematic situation in order to find patterns that can be mapped. We will observe what they actually do, how they solve their problems, and what they show to be their preferred way of development.

To start our appreciative inquiry, we will have a closer look at the source of all cultural behavior.

Appreciating culture

The archetype team culture

We can see that individuals acquire social behavior through observation, giving meaning, copying, experimenting, getting feedback, and adapting. For most of us this starts when we are children living in a family. The family is the first group to which we belong -- it is our “archetype team.” In this family we have a family culture based on shared norms and values that determine our behavior. Our experiences in this “mother of all teams” may greatly influence our behavior in future teams and organizations.

Purely based on observation, we may state that already as children we have individual needs and social needs that we will go to great lengths to obtain and secure. How these needs are met molds our concept of freedom. On the one hand, we have the need to express our opinions and wishes and to act accordingly. On the other hand, we need security, support, trust, and guidance. The art of growing up in a family is balancing those needs. This is not a lot different in the other teams in which we will participate later in life.

If we take a closer look at the individual’s needs, we see four main aspects that determine his or her behavior:

- 1 His or her identity as an independent individual: his/her individuality
- 2 His or her relation towards others: his/her role in a group
- 3 His or her attitude towards authority in any form: when and why to accept authority
- 4 His or her attitude towards rules: his/her rights and obligations put in a rule-system

We will discuss these four aspects to discover their meaning in a family context.

Two aspects in which a person expresses his behavioral freedom

Individuality

The individual feels he is unique, one of a kind. He is a person, different from others. He has the right to be different. It is the basis of the distinction all human beings make: me and the “rest of the world.” The individual lives in a continuous process of self-actualization. In the family it is important to understand to what degree individuality can be expressed without disrupting family life.

Role

The individual’s awareness of the *rest of the world* is a second important aspect of culture. The rest of the world, here limited to the family, means that the child has to find a way to relate to the other family members. Where do I fit in, what are my obligations, what is my role, what is my status, and how do I have influence?

Two aspects limiting a person’s behavioral freedom

Authority

The first aspect is mostly met in the form of the authority of one of the parents. The child will hear: “this is not allowed,” “stop that.” Through influencing, based on the power of their authority, the parents will make clear what is acceptable behavior and what is not. They are responsible for the family and there is (in principle) no need to prove that. Parents have the ascribed status that makes them ascribed power holders. *Ascribed status* means that it goes without proof, contrary to *achieved status* where one’s status is based on performance. Grandparents, the older brother or sister, or even other relatives or elderly people may replace parents, but their power remains based on their ascribed status of being older.

Rule-systems

The second aspect limiting the individual’s behavioral freedom is the acceptance of the fact that whenever we relate to others, we need structured relations. A chaotic relation is a contradiction. We cannot just do what we want whenever we feel like it. Relations are structured by means of rules.

Rules are not about *what* is to be done but *how* it is to be done. We give some importance to promises, appointments, rights, and duties, and we need rules and regulations to structure our cooperation and other relationships. Trust is often built on predictability based on keeping the rules. The rules form systems that dictate the role you have to play in a team. Systems exist to provide security and define obligations for the members of the team.

We recognize two different rule-systems. Rules form a system built out of many or a limited number of rules⁵. However, the number of rules seems not to be the only important aspect of the difference. Rules serve to avoid uncertainty caused by unexpected situations, and a system of rules appears also to be defined by its flexibility. Are exceptions to the rules part of the system, and can exceptions to the existing rules be integrated and generate new rules?

We can see that the answer to these questions leads to different systems. If you need only a few rules and do not allow for exceptions to happen, it is relatively uncomplicated to (make people) stick to the rules. In more complex systems with possibly many exceptions to existing rules, people appreciate rules in a different, more creative way. A system with few rules can be kept, it is very black and white. It may thus generate the feeling of less individual freedom than a more complicated system in which exceptions to general rules are seen as a part of reality, under specific circumstances.

Culture as the expression of one's social freedom

Developing a model in which social freedom can be plotted

When we acquire cultural behavior, we discover the limits of our individual freedom in that particular culture. We may start copying socially desired behavior: "This is how it is done here; this is acceptable or preferred behavior." Mostly we seem to be guided by the effectiveness of this behavior. We come to understand the importance of authorities. They set the boundaries for our freedom to act, a freedom coming from our individual needs or our status in the group. We discover rules to structure our freedom, and we follow the systems and processes.

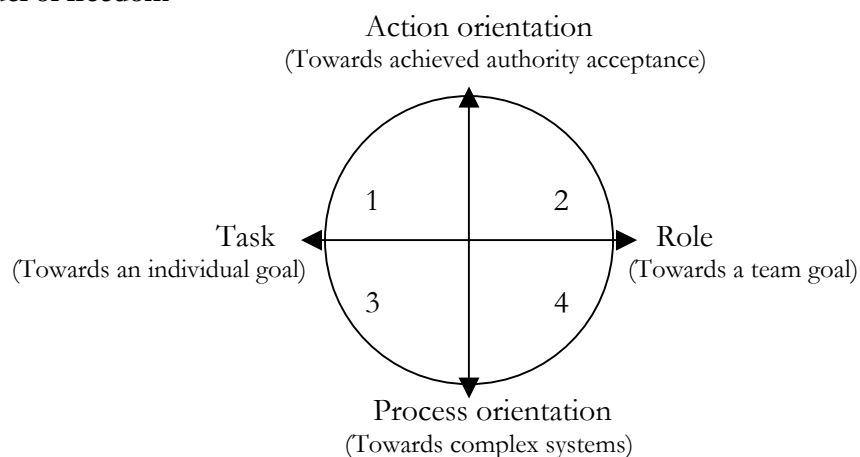
Rule-systems do not control our freedom in the same way as do authorities. Authorities act upon what we *do*; laws, procedures and rules act upon our *thinking*. Thus we find our freedom divided in two fields: the field in which we are action oriented and the field in which we are process oriented. Everybody "lives" these two orientations, but you may prefer to live in one field more than in the other. If you prefer to go into action with the least possible preparation (just do it) and start thinking about improving your acts after you have started, you clearly have an action orientation. If you go for a thorough preparation and a perfect process planning before you start your action, you have a process orientation. If you are a member of a group that has one of these preferences, you live in an "Action" or "Process" culture.

Putting this all together we can *appreciate* that different groups may have at least have two opposite preferences. A group will have a tendency to act if its acceptance of authority (based on *ascribed* status) is weak and its system needs are limited. Another group may have a tendency to put energy into developing systems, planning, and learning, if its need for systems is high, combined with a strong acceptance of authority. These orientations form the context in which we have to understand the meaning of what people say, for example when filling out questionnaires.

Both *Action* orientation and *Process* orientation have their *Individual* and *Social* components. If a person decides that a certain individual goal is important for him, more important than any other obligation to the group, actions and processes are there to support this goal. It is his *Task*. If a person decides that a certain position is important for him, action and processes will serve that goal. He wants to identify with this or that *Role*.

If we put this in a graphic, it takes the form of a culture-model in which we can plot 4 cultural orientations. I will call this model: The Model of Freedom (MOF)

The model of freedom



The 4 quarters of the circle, shaped by the 4 aspects of culture, define 4 building stones for cultural orientations. Each cultural orientation will thus consist of two building stones. E.g. Action orientation

consists of the building stones 1 and 2, Task orientation consists of building stones 1 and 3, and so on. The building stones 1 to 4 are labeled:

- 1 *Individual freedom*: Individual (non-competition) acts enhancing self-actualization. Defined by the individual's degree of task orientation (self-actualization) and the limits put to all actions in line with this orientation by any recognized authority.
- 2 *Social freedom*: Acts according to the role one chooses (competition) in a group. Defined by all actions through which a person attempts, and is allowed by a recognized authority, to obtain a certain position in a group.
- 3 *Protecting systems*: Rules to protect the individual, his rights put in rules. Defined by the degree to which a person feels the need to be protected by rules and laws to express his individuality.
- 4 *Control systems*: Rules to control people in competition, their obligations put in rules. Defined by the degree to which a group feels the need for controlling rules and other systems to order the community.

How do we discover the cultural orientation of a group?

The MOF was constructed after an appreciative inquiry into social behavior. The MOF is not the result of the analysis of questionnaires in which group members are asked about their preferred solution to problems. This does not make the use of questionnaires for social research redundant. As we stated before, those answers would gain importance if we knew more about the context in which the readers gave their answers. The MOF is meant as a structure to furnish contexts that give meaning to a statement.

The orientation of a culture can be read out of many traces and signs. *General indicators* are history, climate, wealth, political system, religion, language, and access to the Internet. They all give indications for the cultural orientation. A wealthy social middle-class influences the expression of individuality. Access to information through the Internet influences people's appreciation of authorities. The threat of (armed) conflicts raises people's need for protective rules and systems. Culture is not static; it is influenced by developments and changes in our world. Cultural orientations may show to be pretty stable; within those orientations, norms and values are part of a continuing change process.

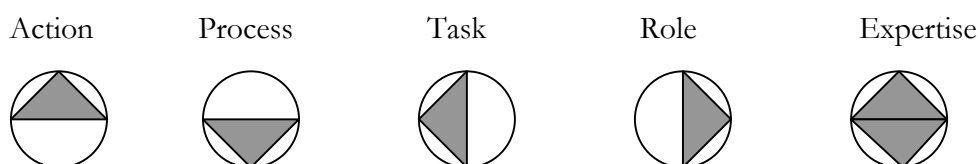
More *specific indicators* can be found in everybody's daily practice. For example, a North-American company gave the managers of a French subsidiary the assignment to come up with a plan to cut the costs of the company. The French management team started calculating and planning and finally, after spending a couple of days on the project with the complete team, proposed a plan to the Americans in which they targeted to reduce the costs 18 % in 6 months.

The Americans did not react positively to this figure and said they thought they would obtain a reduction of 30% in the same time. They confessed they did not do too many calculations but had a very good meeting, the spirit was high, and they more or less decided they would do it, and could do it, because it needed to be done.

It is clear that we have two groups with opposite cultural orientations and that the first conclusion of both parties – namely that the other party is incompetent – is less realistic given the level of the organization where this takes place. These Americans have an Action-orientation and this group of Frenchmen has a Process-orientation. Everything that will happen during the cost-cutting process will have to be understood in this light in order to avoid miscommunication or conflicts.

How will the knowledge of these orientations serve us?

The MOF enables us to interpret group behavior in the context of 5 cultural orientations. We added a fifth orientation because this cultural orientation expresses the balance between the other four. We label them:



Action cultures shoot from the hip. Why aim if you can be the first to shoot and adjust your second shot if the first one missed? Get started, just do it, is heard a lot in those cultures. The underlying system is generally very limited. This culture has a limited number of rules, but strict obedience is required and severe punishments are enforced if the rules are violated. Although the individual seeks self-actualization, the need for conformity (no exceptions to the rule) may also be high. This leads to statements such as: “You are with or against us”; “things are good or evil.” Action cultures don’t like complexity and prefer to go for solutions in a simplified reality, fast. They publish books like: *Five Things to Remember if You Want to Become a Millionaire!* This orientation is often found in Anglo-Saxon cultures and clearly in the USA.

Process cultures aim a long time before they shoot. Why miss if you can have a hit in one attempt with a thorough preparation? Important things take time. Relationships are important for the quality of life. History, art, science, and business give meaning to life. The joy is in the process, not in the outcome of the process – like having a good dinner with the right wines.

Rules are important and one should think of all eventualities, but one has to be creative to survive the system. There are always exceptions to the rules; the world is too complex to catch it in rules, life is too subtle for black and white statements. Books with the title: “Ten secrets to become an expert in wine” do not sell. Fast food restaurants are suspect. This orientation is frequently found in Latin and Asian cultures.

Task cultures feel a strong drive to go for consensus. Social status does not pay off in those cultures. What binds people is the task, and they need to feel involved in the decision-making process to stay motivated for this task. The original decision makers also often reconsider decisions because of lack of support by one of the group. Equality is a very strong, shared value. Heroes are for that reason suspect. Everybody has a right to be different as long as he does not think, or at least does not show that he thinks, he is better than others. Communication tends to be straightforward. This orientation is found in the Northern European cultures, including parts of Germany and The Netherlands.

Role cultures feel little need to express their individuality. This does not mean that they do not have as strong a self-perception as people in other cultures. Individuals identify more easily with groups like the family or the company. They feel they are representatives of groups and share responsibility with team members. Roles and rituals are taking over from more personal behavior and are seen as the most effective way to be in control of reality. Social status is important and is expressed in many ways. Team cultures sometimes combine elements of process cultures. How things are done is sometimes more important than the outcome of a process. The question “why” is often not understood. Communication is high-context. This means that important messages are often not put in clear statements or are not verbalized at all. This orientation is mainly found in Asia but also in some regions around the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Expertise cultures go for a perfect balance between action and process, thinking and doing, theory and practice. The individual feels responsible for his task, needs a high degree of autonomy, and seeks recognition for his expertise. People will not easily start a task if they have the feeling they need more to make it a perfect job. Feedback is given and asked for in a critical way. Experts want to improve; they do not need to be told what went well, they want to know, or will tell, what went wrong. Achievement is important. One is as good as one’s last performance. The unexpected is not appreciated. Communication style is very much content driven. This orientation seems to be prevailing in the countries in the triangle Germany-Northern Italy-Hungary.

Two pairs of opposite orientations: Task-Role and Action-Process

Task and Role orientations seem to be influenced by religion. Most task orientations are found in Protestant regions, even more so in Calvinistic regions. Between task and role oriented cultures, people

are likely to perceive each other as egocentric versus unaccountable. Appreciating both orientations will lead to a reconciliation of individual virtues with team-role cohesiveness.

Action and Process orientations can also be seen as a different basis for culturally produced personality structures, similar to Task and Role orientations. Action orientations are often found among young people all over the world. No need for experience, no time to lose. This orientation is also strongly present in young nations. Process oriented people tend to appreciate the road that leads to the goal more than the goal itself. If an “Action” and a “Process” person meet, they may see each other as superficial (Action people never seem to learn from their experiences), versus negative (Process people always come up with problems and reasons to disagree). Appreciating both orientations would lead to a decisive attitude generating a higher number of successful actions.

Conclusion

The five cultural orientations provide a reference framework in which people’s social and work-related behavior becomes meaningful. These five showed up after an appreciative inquiry of what people actually do in their first team experience, the family. Managing these fundamental mindsets is not easy if one focuses on the differences.

In an appreciative inquiry we discover what works well in each one of them. If we stretch the positive aspects of the consequences of these mindsets, we are on our way to reconcile them. As mentioned above, Task and Role reconciliation will enhance team effectiveness; Action and Process reconciliation will enhance team efficiency. The five cultural orientations can be seen as the fundamentals of cultures. The more we get to know about these fundamentals, the more we will be able to analyze what is built on them or predict what may be built on them. Thus the orientations increase in explanatory power through the accumulation of new data, whatever the source may be. Data may be gathered through questionnaires, come from the correlation with other models⁶ or from plain personal experience⁷.

In the MOF we have the possibility to reconcile the consequences of the belief-systems of the static and the process character of cultural differences, the outcomes of the research from Hofstede and Trompenaars. Hofstede focused on the stability of the cultural orientations whereas Trompenaars gave priority to the actual state of affairs, a moment in a process within a stable context. The appreciative approach uses the beneficial elements of a culture for a given situation and provides a framework for reconciliation between all cultures.

¹ Charles Elliott, *Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry* (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1999).

² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

³ Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences* (London: Sage Publications, 1984).

⁴ Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture*.

⁵ Fons Trompenaars labels this: “Universalism and Particularism.”

⁶ Our MOF correlates with the well-known model of organizational culture of Roger Harrison and Herb Stokes in *Diagnosing Organizational Culture*. The MOF’s structure also matches David A. Kolb’s learning circle, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. It also strongly correlates with Timothy Leary’s observations on behavior.

⁷ Much in this article is based on the experience of the author. As a consultant and trainer he conducted cross-cultural management training session all over the world for more than ten years. As a trade consultant he worked and lived in different countries in Asia and Europe for another fifteen years.