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Evaluation of past and future events in a cross-cultural perspective

Abstract

The text presents the author's study on the borderline of anthropology and psychology; the American psychological research was the starting point which showed the asymmetry of temporal value: people value more the future events than past ones. The author decided to check what events are more highly valued – past or future – in different countries with differences in duration of a history of a state among the representatives of so called individualistic or collective cultures. The article shows the theoretical and methodological preparations to the projected research among the foreign students in Gdańsk in the perspective of psychological anthropology.

Keywords: evaluation of events, individualism, collectivism, linear time, cyclic time, psychological anthropology

Temporal value asymmetry

People put a different value to things that already happened in the past and to those which are going to come. It is quite common to hear that the pain was not as bad as they thought it would be, the test was not so difficult and the job was not so hard. In 2008 Eugene M. Caruso, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Timothy D. Wilson conducted studies to show the existence of temporal value asymmetry. They claim that the future is more precious to people than the past and such a belief has quite an influence on our lives. This for example can be used during negotiating a payment for the work done, it also can influence financial compensation after an accident.

Caruso *et al.* arranged a simple experiment. They described a situation and asked the people to define the amount of money which they would bet in that situation. Each person was assigned to one of two groups: the group where the situ-

ation had already developed and another where the situation was yet to happen. As predicted, more money was bet in the second group (Caruso *et al.* 2008: 789).

Caruso *et al.* try to explain why people value the future events more. Firstly, they point out the uncertainty of the future. It is much easier to judge something that already happened. That is why people tend to underestimate coming events and they rather assign to them too much value. Secondly, the past is unchangeable and the future is uncertain and that could be also a rational reason for existing temporal value asymmetry.

I questioned myself if all those conclusions are correct also in other countries. The scientists from the United States like to generalize their results for the whole world but often forget that other cultures are quite different. That is why I thought that it could be very interesting to repeat those studies in Asia, especially in China and Japan.

I chose these two countries because I was searching for a good contrast to the United States. I was especially interested in some aspects like: collectivism orientation, the duration of national history and the view on the nature of time.

A generally known fact is that the United States has a much shorter history than the mentioned Asian countries. However, it is worth explaining the concept of collectivism and the issue of time.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Professor Geert Hofstede, a Dutch sociologist, conducted one of the most comprehensive studies on how the values in the workplace are influenced by culture. He collected between 1967 and 1973 a large data from the employees of IBM covering more than 70 countries. Later, he conducted more studies in other groups (e.g. students or civil service managers). He analyzed all of the acquired data in this way so that values scores were grouped statistically into four clusters. These four groups became the Hofstede dimensions of national culture:

- Power Distance (PDI),
- Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV),
- Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS),
- Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI).

In 1991 a fifth dimension was added. Michael Bond, after researching the group of the Chinese, suggested a dimension based on Confucian dynamism. He called it Long-Term Orientation (LTO). The sixth, last dimension was added in 2010 and was based on Michael Minkov's analysis of data collected in 93 countries. This new dimension is called Indulgence versus Restraint.

Hofstede wrote a book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, where scores on the dimensions are listed for 76 countries (in 2010 edition), giving an interesting material to conduct comparisons.

Culture only exists by comparison. The country scores on the dimensions are relative – societies are compared to other societies. Without making a comparison, a country score is meaning-

less. These relative scores have been proven to be quite stable over decades. The forces that cause cultures to shift tend to be global or continent-wide. This means that they affect many countries at the same time, so that if their cultures shift, they shift together, and their relative positions remain the same (Hofstede 2013).

From the book of Hofstede we can learn the following:

Country	IDV dimension	Position of country
United States	91	1
Poland	60	22/24
Japan	46	33/35
China	20	56/61

According to the definition presented by Hofstede and Hofstede (2007), individualism and collectivism are opposites to each other. Individualism is characteristic of the societies in which the ties between individuals are loose and everyone is mostly interested in caring for their own welfare and their close families. Collectivism means a society in which people from birth are in strong, consistent internal groups, to ensure their safety and protection in exchange for unquestioned loyalty (Hofstede, Hofstede 2007).

Hofstede and Hofstede (2007) in their book claim that it is much easier to find a collectivist than individualist society. He emphasizes that we deal everywhere with a membership in a group, and actually very rarely units operate in isolation from the others, only taking care of themselves and their lives (Hofstede, Hofstede 2007). It is not only their point of view. According to some (Ting-Toomey, Kurogi 1988 in: Griffin 2003), over two thirds of the world's population is born in collectivist cultures, while just under one third live in individualistic cultures.

The issue of belonging to a group is basically one of the key ones, if we consider the dimension of collectivism or individualism but at the moment I would like to present probable causes of the differences.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2007) focus primarily on four factors. The first of these is the nature of the culture. Referring to the opinion of archaeologists, he claims that hunter-gatherer groups the beginning of the development of humanity as organized societies. They migrated around the big terrain, but over the time some of them stopped moving creating agricultural societies and villages, which later turned into the cities. Hofstede also points out the results of the research conducted by anthropologists on gatherer-hunting tribes, farming communities and urbanized societies. In the first ones we can observe the existence of nuclear families or small communities. In the agricultural settlements and villages we rather see multigenerational families or large groups connected internally. However, city dwellers, even if they came from the village, begin again to live in nuclear families. Since in most of the countries there are only two types of subcultures: agricultural and urban, we can make a simple conclusion that with increasing urbaniza-

tion and migration of people to cities increases the level of individualism. There are exceptions from this rule, especially when we look at Southeast Asia.

Another factor is the wealth (Hofstede, Hofstede 2007). With the increasing availability of resources, population turns to individualism. Poorer societies are somehow forced to share common goods, while in wealthier ones every citizen can have something of their own. At the same time Hofstede says that society which is ready to take collectivist actions has more economic growth. Here again, as an example, we can look at Asia and even more specifically at Japan. However, among young Japanese fascinated by American culture there occurs reversal from the family traditions and we can observe an increasing level of individualism.

The third source of differences according to Hofstede is geography, with particular emphasis on the distance of the capital of the country from the equator. It was found out that the survival in temperate or cold climates requires self-reliance and independence – one had to be able to defend himself. This has helped in some ways also to develop individualism (Hofstede, Hofstede 2007).

The past is the last very important factor in the level of individualism (Hofstede, Hofstede 2007). History of the society, with particular emphasis on a religion and philosophy, influences the level of individualism in modern times. Asian countries are still under the influence of Confucian teachings supporting collectivist values. Harmony is an important concept practiced in life there. The high level of individualism in America, Australia or New Zealand is associated with an influx of immigrants, that is the people who have to cope alone. Having all those factors in mind, it is easier to understand where different values of individualism in different countries come from.

A matter of communication may be an interesting issue, too. In collectivist societies silence is not something unnatural. Family and friends can meet just to exchange chit-chat and then they sit in silence for a long period of time without experiencing it as something bothering (Hofstede, Hofstede 2007). It is very significant that a representative of an individualistic culture would feel the inner need to fill the silence with words. One would think that, since they have met with an immediate circle of friends, this is in order to share some information, even if it was banal (Hofstede, Hofstede 2007). There is a different approach in collectivist cultures where the front door is always open to guests and being together is more important than talking about anything. The explanation for such an approach to communication breakdown can be introduced by an American cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall. He found out that members of collectivist cultures communicate in a highly contextualized and individualistic – low contextualized way. This is explained as follows:

Hall's assumption is that people in each culture communicate both ways but it is important which of them prevails.

As I already mentioned, in collectivist cultures silence is not something of concern but the individualist may feel the need to fill it with words. Once again I would like to return to the topic, noting at the same time the division into a high and low context.

For an ordinary member of an individualistic culture (low-context) the focus is only on another person. Talking to him/her requires careful listening to the spoken words and also absorbing a large part of resources. In addition, each spread with a sense of individualist would distort the meaning of utterances. A completely different situation happens when someone is coming from collectivist culture. Such a person receives information about another person not only with his/her words but also by non-verbal communication and knowledge of his/her origin. In other words, looking at it from a much broader perspective. We can say that seeing the background – although this example refers to a communication, it really goes far beyond it. It could be also that the ability to see the background and consider it as an important way of communication relating to the current situation is also reflected in the perception of the past. In collectivist cultures, it should be much closer and much more related to the present than it is in individualist cultures, focusing more on the here and now, possibly for future events.

The issue of time in different cultures

The issue of time in different cultures is described by researchers from a number of perspectives. Hofstede and Hofstede (2007) introduced one of the indicators which he called a long-term orientation (LTO – Long Time Orientation). But every day we can meet problems with a different approach to time e.g. in cross-cultural negotiations or even during traveling to other countries.

Richard W. Brislin and Eugene S. Kim published in 2003 in the *Applied Psychology: an International Review* an article touching many aspects of the approach to the passage of time in different cultures. They described ten points which can lead to complete misunderstanding between the representatives of different countries and perhaps even to conflicts. I would like to briefly present only one of their conclusions.

In the article we can read about the orientation to the past, present or future. Depending on from which culture a person comes from, a different approach may occur to the events that already happened, are happening now, or will take place. Some of these people consider thinking of the past as a waste of time while for others it will be a source of important experience. Similarly, some will be focused on life here and now, while others will look to the future (Brislin, Kim 2003).

Leaf Van Boven and Laurence Ashworth from the United States connected the perception of the past and future events with the emotions they evoke. They found out that extreme expectations (thinking if it is going to be the best or the worst experience) may explain the stronger response to future events. However, everything that has already taken place, usually causes only secondary feelings, far from extreme (Van Boven, Ashworth 2007). Asymmetric mental simulation can be another factor differentiating emotions. When we turn our thoughts to the future, we tend to focus attention on it more and think about it in more detail. This

is at least partly responsible for the occurrence of stronger emotions. The conclusion of the researchers was, among other things, that people will appreciate much more the expected results than those achieved.

Showing how it affects methodology during researches is another very interesting topic. Now, if we expect the results to be based on emotions, it is better in this case to ask the question about the expected events, the anticipation. Thanks to this, stronger feelings appear and we get clearer answers and results (Van Boven and Ashworth 2007). But we have to keep in mind that all of these proposals come, in fact, from the United States – an individualistic culture, which does not draw from the past as much as people do e.g. in Asia.

The question of referring to the past in different cultures has been researched by Li-Jun Ji, Tiejuan Guo, Zhang Zhiyong and Deanna Messervey (2009). They decided to compare the results obtained in the two countries: Canada and China – individualistic and collectivist cultures. They made the assumption that individualists think in an analytical way, focusing on the object and not the background, while collectivists capture everything holistically, so the background can provide important information about the object. If you translate this into consideration of time, the object could be a situation just occurring, while the background are all the past events.

The authors remind us that Brislin and Kim (2003), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) came to the conclusions from which emerge a picture of the Chinese people as those contemplating the past, respecting the tradition of having a long-term orientation. An important aspect is also that time for them is not linear but cyclical. That is why the past is valued and traditions or customs are respected. Past events are not something to be forgotten, because they can be a source of knowledge about present and future events. With the cyclic perception of time the Chinese people can see similarities between the past, present and future. Significantly more likely than e.g. Americans, the way they are now is a result of what happened in the past. At the same time we should remember that, according to the Chinese people, some current patterns do not have to continue in the future, they accept change, even expect them.

Americans have a completely different approach to time, which they see as linear – and so it is one-way, definitely moving forward and never returning to its previous state. It also can be seen in the development of science, where new theories replace old, describing them generally as false and cutting away from them. Researchers tend to focus more on what is happening now, not trying to learn from the past. Paradoxically, because of it, it may appear that Americans believe in the stability of events and that they will remain the same in the future. The idea of the permanence of things may indicate a lack of flexibility in thinking (Ji *et al.* 2009: 761–769).

The question of the distance to the events of the past is also an important issue. This allows you to determine how willingly a person is using the experience that they have already gained. It is expected that members of collectivist cultures, for whom the key elements in the background and the context of the situation are important, will have much easier and therefore closer access to what has already

passed. Studies confirm this. The Chinese feel subjectively less distance than the Canadians because they pay more attention to the past (Ji *et al.* 2009).

In conclusion, one might say that collectivist cultures often use the experiences that have been collected by them and also earlier generations. Seeing the current situation in the context of the past is characteristic of holistic thinking. It also helps to see some recurring patterns or relationships, which helps to establish the cyclical perception of time where it occurs.

The individualistic culture are focused on the present moment or the future, leaving the past far behind as something that is over and you should not go back to. This view is typical of those for whom time is linear and always runs forward. But then, it is much easier to become its slave.

Of course, a simple connection between individualism/collectivism and the cyclical or linear nature of time is wrong. However, one should remember that the different perception of the passing moments may help in understanding the different approaches to the past or upcoming moments.

Methodology

During my studies I would like to repeat one of the experiments conducted by Caruso *et al.* (2008). I will have prepare the questionnaires in native languages (Japanese and Chinese) in two versions: one describing a past event and other describing future ones. I would like to ask the students from the chosen countries to fill in the questionnaires, valuating the amount of money.

At the same moment I would like them to answer two questions about the nature of time and period of history (given in years) which they find important for their culture.

Project objectives and expected results

One of the main goals of my project is to test the hypothesis about how the perception of time and the rate of individualism in a culture from which the respondents come from affects the valuation of the events in the past and the future. I will also confront the results with the knowledge obtained from the literature.

I expect to obtain different results than those of the United States. Because in the collectivist Asian cultures the past is much closer in thinking and more important for people, so past events should be valued higher in comparison to the American study. Perhaps they will even be valued higher than future events.

We should ask ourselves the question what practical aspects for anthropologists might have my research. Firstly, it can help determine how much it is worth to explore the source from the past, if you examine the modern culture. Secondly, as I mentioned earlier, when we ask about the things related to emotions, we should ask the question about the future, not the past. Such methodology would

be suggested during the studies in the United States. If, however, my prediction would be confirmed in the case of my research in collectivist cultures, we should ask quite the opposite – about the past. This would be an important clue to the anthropologists who want to gather information in interviews. And thirdly, each additional item helping us in better understanding other cultures and making contacts with them easier is something that we as anthropologists should not underestimate.

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