

## National/Societal Culture

The national/societal level of culture is perhaps the most prevalent level in empirical studies and popular perceptions of cultural differences. After all, the work of Hofstede (1984) and the more recent GLOBE Study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) equate nationality and culture. This type of analysis can be useful for determining the core cultural values that are safer for a foreigner to assume to be prevalent. However, a superficial understanding of this level of culture, without recognition of the underlying complexities within a national, or (more aptly), societal context, is insufficient. This is even more important in today's global business reality, with its focus on emerging markets and shifting economic relationships.

Understanding and contextualizing cultural differences across nationalities is necessary for any organization's globalization or internationalization strategy, but it is dangerous when cultural differences across countries are overly simplified and undifferentiated. When describing global diversity, the notion of "national culture" is often considered nonpartisan and readily accepted; however, this designation is often not neutral or obvious. Rather, it is anchored in the specific social and historical conditions of the scientific/industrial experiences of Western civilization. As Ernest Gellner (1983) outlined, the idea of a consistent, unifying "national culture" is intricately tied to the rise of the European nation state and nationalism. Following this theory, "national culture" may be ideologically motivated to create a sense of shared and unified identity among otherwise dispersed and diverse groups, leading to a collective "nationality." The willingness to accept this notion may result from the status of nation states as the dominant form of political organization.

Reliance solely on national labels as reference to and sometimes even explanation for cultural differences can pose a professional dilemma for those who seek (a) to educate and inform on cultural differences and (b) to enter new and unfamiliar cultural terrain as part of their international business ventures. Problems converge frequently as a result of depictions of specific business cultures through overly simplistic, "nationality"-based comparisons. Recognizing this monolithic treatment, TMC refers to this level of culture as "national/societal" to accurately depict this notion as a generalization of very complex, societal culture.

The value of referring to national/societal culture is notable because there often are core values that foreigners will find safer to assume while preparing to enter an unfamiliar business culture. For example, a foreigner seeking to outsource a business process to China may find himself or herself encountering *guanxi*, or "relationships," and *mianzi*, or "face." According to TMC's China expert Marco Chan in TMC's podcast on national/societal culture, *guanxi* is similar to the concept of networking, and in China, it is largely based on reciprocity. *Mianzi* defines one's social standing and has a quantitative value: it can be lost, gained, earned, or taken away.

Thus, a foreign businessperson who becomes angry or who embarrasses Chinese team members in a negotiation meeting may inadvertently "lose face" with his or her Chinese counterparts and be perceived as disrespectful. If a foreigner does not rely on relationships with Chinese contacts to gain introductions, he or she may not gain access to the meeting at all. Assuming that fundamental values are present can help foreigners to prepare their business ventures, but adapting strategies around these values is often necessary to ensuring success.

However, the existence of possible exceptions should not be ignored or disregarded. Showing strong emotion or raising the volume of one's voice may be considered disrespectful, but in Chinese dialects that tend to be livelier, a louder voice may be more acceptable. Similarly, the use of intermediaries does not indicate that

Chinese businesspeople cannot negotiate directly, but rather that they tend to prefer indirect communication. Although it is safer to accept the existence of some core values in the local culture, the social identities, contexts, and circumstances are dynamic and can change, leading to exceptions to these assumptions as well as the strategies and conclusions drawn from them.

The national/societal level is prevalent in most discussions of the impact of culture on business ventures and can be informative, particularly in illuminating the existence of fundamental values that are safer for foreigners to assume. But to accurately discuss and act on this level of culture, one must remember that “nationality” stands less for a singular, unifying characterization and more for a geographic space in which specific cultural dynamics, identities, histories, and societal discourses have uniquely evolved and acquired meaning. With this in mind, TMC seeks to responsibly represent the differences and similarities among nationalities by referencing national/societal culture as *part* of our overall efforts to elucidate each level of culture and identify their respective relevance to managers and leaders in today’s globalizing context.

## References

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