# The Worldprism Model of Cultural Differences

## The Intellectual Roots

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## Introduction

The Worldprism framework of **cultural orientations** was designed with one objective in mind:

Provide our business clients with a simple (but not simplistic) tool for recognizing and adapting to a small, but powerful set of cognitive and behavioral differences found in cross-cultural situations.

We wanted to create a model that was intellectually sound while also being highly practical.

We were not trying to create a framework for gathering cultural data per se, but to provide business practitioners with a tool for 'reading' the real-time **cultural dynamics** at work in, for example, cross-cultural meetings, presentations, negotiations, teams, and supervisory activities like delegating, coaching and giving feedback.

The challenge for anyone working across cultures is to understand and respect what can be known at the group level (culture is a statistical representational of group norms), while relating to individuals from the group who may or may not conform to the statistical representation.

Rather than businessmen and women going into a cross-cultural situation with a pre-formulated group stereotype or set of generalizations (even those based on statistical data) we wanted them to be able to 'read' and relate to complex **individuals**. Individuals who would undoubtedly be infused with cultural orientations derived from their membership in different groups (e.g., national, regional, organizational, and professional groups), but also personal orientations based on their individual life experiences. No individual is defined by a cognitive or behavioral cultural norm.

Cultural data and generalizations about cultural tendencies can help us create informed expectations about what orientations might influence an interaction, but ultimately we need to relate to individuals. We don't negotiate with or sell to a 'culture', although some cultural awareness and knowledge about ourselves and others can help inform the situational reading process.

## Model Development

The model was developed and refined over several years between1982 and 2000. It was influence by a number of factors:

**Education:** My background in sociology had introduced me to the influential work of (among others):

Kluckhohn and Strodbeck and their approach of looking at cultures ("world views') through the lens of value orientations, e.g., Time Sense, Social Relations

Talcott Parsons and his model of pattern variables – contrasting values to which individuals orient themselves in social interactions. Specifically: affectivity – affective neutrality; diffuseness – specificity; particularism – universalism; ascription – achievement; collectivity orientation – self orientation

Edward Hall's work on culture, particularly his concepts of polychromic and monochromic time, and high and low context cultures.

All of these early influences helped shape the Worldprism model.

## Early Program Development and Consulting

When I first started working in cross-cultural program development and consulting in the late 1980s and early 90s, those researchers who were primarily influencing the field were Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaar. Their empirical studies helped quantify cultural differences, but in my teaching and consulting using their models, I kept confronting problems.

First and foremost was the issue of language. Participants in many client firms struggled with the technical/academic terminology in both models:

| Hofstede – Value Dimensions | Trompenaars |
|---|---|
| Power distance | Universalism vs. Particularism |
| Individualism vs. Collectivism | Individualism vs. Collectivism |
| Uncertainty Avoidance | Neutral vs. Emotional Specific vs. |
| Masculinity vs. Femininity | Diffuse Achievement vs. |
| Long Term Orientation vs. Short Term Orientation | Ascription Sequential vs. |
| Indulgence vs. Restraint | Synchronic Internal vs. External Control |

Participants would struggle with terms like Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Particularism, Diffuse, and Synchronic. The language seemed very distant and irrelevant to the workplace. It was acting as a barrier to learning.

The second problem was the heavy emphasis on statistics. The statistics tended to freeze a culture in time, but cultures do change and they have more complexity than can be captured in a statistical table. I found participants adopting or reinforcing stereotypes by locking themselves in to culture's position on the chart.

## Later Program Development and Consulting

Given the problems I encountered with using the models of Hofstede and Trompenaars, I decided to try and integrate my academic learning about culture with my personal experiences of teaching in many cultures around the world. I also decided to gather information from participant groups (both in the form of participants diagraming the current orientations of their national groups [and the perceived direction of change], and in the form of real-world mini case studies produced by individual participants. I also held discussions with participants about cultural differences that caused them the most difficulty.

It was from this groundwork that the Worldprism emerged.

In my teaching and consulting work, I had found that the value orientations approach of Kluckhohn and Strodbeck was well received and understood. Based on my academic learning and

teaching/consulting work, I first created three dimensions of culture that encapsulated the major differences expressed in the literature/classroom/ mini case studies.

# Those dimensions were:

● **Relating:** Expectations about how we should relate to one another

● **Regulating:** Expectations about how we should manage the world around us

● **Reasoning:** Expectations about how we should think about problems

The use of the three Rs was to help participants remember the core dimensions, and also develop a shared vocabulary about culture.

Much of the research literature had identified key cultural orientations, but I needed to create a more user friendly language. Based on discussions with clients and participants, I found I also needed to pull out specific orientations from higher level concepts like High and Low Context cultures.

## RELATING

**Orientations**

1. **Tasks vs. Relationships** Focus
2. **Explicit vs. Implicit** Communication
3. **Individual vs. Group** Identity

Orientation 1. Is derived from Parson's Universalism – Particularism pattern variable (later used by Trompenaars). A Task-driven culture tends to be Universalistic in which rules, plans, and contracts take precedence over any relationships. In a Relationship-driven (Particularistic) culture things get done through relationships rather than codes, standards or rules. Orientation 2. is derived from Hall's descriptions of High and Low cultures. Low context cultures communicate explicitly through words. High context cultures tend to be implicit communicators with importance placed not on just what is said, but how it is said, where it is said, when it is said, and even to what is not said. Orientation 3. is standard throughout social science research literature including, Parsons, Hofstede and Trompenaars.

## REGULATING

**Orientations**

1. **Risk Taking vs. Risk Avoiding** Behavior
2. **Tight vs. Loose** Orientation to Time
3. **Shared vs. Concentrated** Orientation to Power

Orientation 1. is derived from Hofstede's concept of Uncertainty Avoidance (Risk Taking is Low Uncertainty Avoidance and Risk Avoiding is High Uncertainty Avoidance). Orientation 2. is derived from Halls concepts of Monochronic (Loose) and Poychronic (Tight) time. Orientation 3. relates specifically to Hofstede's concept of Power Distance (Shared is Low Power Distance and Concentrated is High Power Distance).
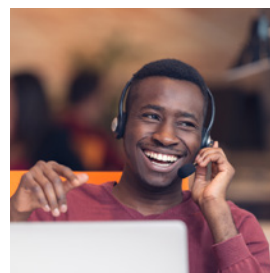
## REASONING

### Orientations

1. **Linear vs. Circular** Approach to Problem Solving
2. **Facts vs. Thinking** Focus
3. **Simple vs. Complex** Orientation to Explanations

Orientation 1. is derived from the diffuseness – specificity pattern variable of Parsons. In Trompenaar's language these concepts are labeled Specific and Diffuse. Linear relates to a Specific culture in which the elements of a problem are analyzed separately and then put together again. The whole is the sum of the parts. In a Circular (Diffuse) culture the problem solver starts with the whole. He/she places high value on the relationships between elements. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Orientation 2. is derived from Hall's High and Low Context concepts. In High Context cultures thinking tends to be deductive, proceeding from the general, the abstract (axioms and principles) to the specific. Low context cultures tend toward inductive thinking, proceeding from the concrete and specific (facts) to the general. Orientation 3. is derived from the Uncertainty Avoidance concept of Hofstede. Cultures with high levels of Uncertainty Avoidance tend to want very detailed explanations to avoid risk. Lots of background information is usually given, and the thinking process needs to be explained. Cultures with a low level of Uncertainty Avoidance tend to want just the 'essentials' with little background or contextual information.

Participants in our workshops are shown the drawbacks and advantages of each orientation. The intent is for the participant to not only recognize and adapt to a difference in orientation, but to gain a degree of flexibility in switching between orientations. With this flexibility, a learner can choose the orientation that makes most sense in a given context.

### Use of the Model

The Worldprism questionnaire/profiling tool is used in our cross-cultural training in several ways:

➡ Individual cultural self-awareness

➡ Comparison of an individual profile with that of a group, e.g., with a national, organizational, or team culture

➡ Identification of differences within a group, e.g., within a team

➡ Differences between groups, e.g., two teams needing to collaborate or two organizations partnering or merging