

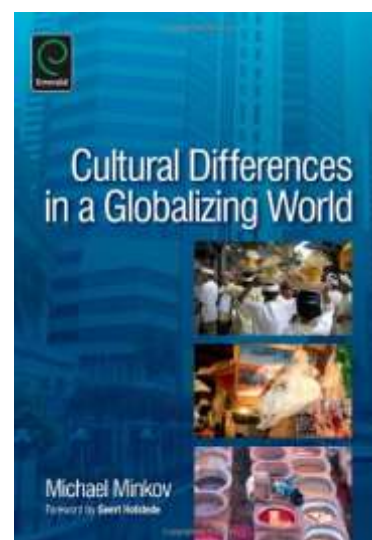
Minkov, Michael , *Cultural Differences in a Globalizing World*

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Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at diversophy.com

When I accepted the invitation to review *Cultural Differences in a Globalizing World*, I did so with one burning question in mind: Is this the dying gasp of the essentialist approach to studying and teaching about cultures, or will it be a bridge that connects where we have come from with where we need to go? In other words, will I be disappointed by continuing to find a growing gap between the traditional boilerplate of intercultural work, or will I be elated at finding resources that will reach into the hearts and minds of those with whom I work as we seek to build human comprehension and cohabitation in a frightfully fragmented world?

As we are learning in the intercultural world, context is increasingly important. So it is only fair that I take a look at the context in which I begin and pursue this review. The post delivered the book just as newscasters were alerting us to the tragic bombing and slaughter occurring in the name of culture in Norway. Pundits were immediately off and running to assign guilt and establish motives. Muslim conspiracy? A madman? And, when it was discovered to be an ultra-right blonde Norwegian, inquiry shifted to which of the influences in his life were to blame? Commentators were wiggling each and every way to avoid saying the obvious, that the perpetrator was a product of cultural environments that we all own and are responsible for. This burdens interculturalists with the awareness that perhaps what we know, or what we should know, should be making a difference in how the world not only conducts the business of business, but the business of economics, politics, religion, and the structuring of societies to the benefit of those who inhabit them. Are we building stereotypes, or are we building a community by how we do our work?



In the Introduction, Minkov contextualizes his work, using quotations to express our current disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of globalization, the failed policies of multiculturalism and overly hyped diversity initiatives. Research from the Pew Foundation is gratuitously cited to assert that pride in the superiority of one's culture is connected to poverty, ignorance, and lack of exposure to the wider world. It is not suggested that this result might be explained by popular resistance to being devoured by cultures that they are fully familiar with via colonization and media penetration.

The author lists a dozen myths about culture that he hopes to dispel in subsequent pages. He despairs of his message reaching people strongly attached to universality of the values and beliefs of their upbringing. All the same time he paradoxically touts culture-specific data as indicative of a sensible relativism. He points to his own research as well as that of the World Values Survey as making up the meat of the book and affirms the longitudinal validity of these studies. He describes the book as argumentative, certainly inviting us to argue with it.

In the first chapter Minkov, reviewing some highlights of the history of cultural studies, defends what he calls "objective evidence derived from scientific research," namely, "measurable culture." He dismisses the usefulness of lesser forms of knowledge, viz., impressionism, subjectivism and accumulated wisdom, for understanding cultures, coming down exclusively in favor of empirical evidence. He proceeds to list the classically defined elements, values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, self-perception, cognitive ability, and behaviors along with stereotypes, as those measurable elements that help us to arrive at a definition of culture. These elements provide study targets for generating empirically-based conclusions about individual cultures and cultural groupings. To underline the fact that cultures may be shared as well as generate deviancies, Minkov takes aim at the US stereotype, that "all Americans are unique."

The main problem with empirically-elaborated dimensional approaches is that so-called cultural "values," as cited by their authors, are not values at all but abstractions created by researchers to interpret and label clusters of information that seem coherent to them. The target cultures studied have no hand in the definition of these values and will frequently resist them as a neocolonial imposition on their sense of self. When a culture is allowed to define its own values, we are more likely to see what is stable in them lying beneath the trends, fashions, current tastes and fads which are likely to appear in responses to research questionnaires, which are interpreted and evaluated by strangers (albeit native scholars brought up in the empirical faith). Here we can apply a piece of conventional French wisdom about the deceptiveness of what suddenly appears to be changing or even revolutionary, "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*" (The more things change, the more they remain the same.) I say this not to dispute the fact that what we have been calling cultures do develop and change, though in most cases at a glacial rate, nor to dismiss the fact that certain convergences may be occurring and even accelerating in the world of Web 2.0. Rather, I am suspicious of the reliability of statistical studies of change in the short term without a close and long look at the contextual elements that might be responsible for a given statistical snapshot.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that the idea of "culture" remains defensible. It is easy to accept assertions that various elements of a culture are interdependent, are not predictable of any given individual in the culture, and may be posited as the dominant values in a national framework. In the defense of the findings of cross-cultural studies, the author asserts, "Fortunately, the results of any well designed large-scale cross-cultural study can be checked almost as easily as the weather forecasts." Certainly Bulgarian meteorologists must be vastly superior to those in the neighborhoods where I have lived.

There are also operational assumptions that groups of cultural and geographic neighbors should cluster in their values when these are examined, and that groups of characteristics can be correlated and reduced to an overarching dimension. We are unfortunately thrown into a number of chicken and egg dilemmas when it comes to the interpretation of the influence of, for example, religion on culture and culture on religion, and ditto for education, political systems, economic development, technology, physical environment, and particularly biology where there's a long history of damaging, biologically-based distinctions about human beings.

Chapter 2 is a very brief overview of major large-scale cross-cultural studies starting with Hofstede and ending with the world values survey, adding a footnoted list of various other researches.

With Chapter 3, we enter into the first of Minkov's four dimensions of national and ethnic culture, that of *Industry vs. Indulgence*, and I am already feeling pangs of guilt about reviewing this book on a sunny Sunday afternoon, a ten minute bike ride from the beach. The author examines a wide range of economic and anthropological studies and allied perceptions about the environmental, political and other cultural factors that may help to define certain group's position on scales of economic performance, competitiveness, and speed of economic development.

More interesting than the graphing of countries on this dimension is the anecdotal information found as the author discusses various cultures under such headings as self-reliance, moral discipline, Confucian dynamism, thrift and savings, hard work, *Karoshi* and workaholism, including examples of how Triandis's tight vs. loose cultural norms are perceived and acted out. One of the more interesting aspects found here as well as sporadically throughout the book is the author's observation of behavioral differences (in this chapter about maternal discipline) between Eastern Europe, Bulgaria in particular, and other parts of the world. This leads to a short discussion of forms of social control and another visualization of how happiness relates to the dimension of industry vs. indulgence. The author sums up the differences between highly industrious societies and highly indulgent societies, speculates on the origin of these differences in terms of environmental systems patterns, and raises the question about biological differences that may have a bearing on the results, cautioning that it will take considerable research before one can make reliable conclusions about causality.

Chapter Four introduces the second of the author's dimensions, expressed in a pair of jawbreakers, *Monumentalism vs. Flexumility*, flummoxing my spellchecker. He sets the scene for defining these concepts by recounting experiences in which his familiar behavioral patterns were totally inappropriate when acted out in an alien culture. It must be said that Minkov's short anecdotal excursions are very well written and provide one of the more enjoyable features of the book. Essentially the word "monumentalism" appropriated to this new context is about pride. It attempts to address how people behave when it comes to self-enhancement, self-stability, and similar concepts that contribute to a polarity where, on one hand, identities are immutable and inflexible and, on the other hand, flexible and negotiable.

National cultures are then plotted in a fashion where parental pride is correlated with a high or low level of religious faith. The author then briefly explores the relationship of educational achievement to the monumentalism index. Obviously monumentalism is related to saving face, looking good, and taking pride in oneself. It connects to how compliments are given and received and even to mundane questions such as whom to tip and how much. More sobering is the attempt to correlate high monumentalism scores with low suicide rates, to be distinguished, no doubt, from the current tendency, in some cultures labeled as monumental, to strap on explosives and detonate oneself on a crowded bus.

What does it then mean to be flexhumble? The author opens this discussion with the Japanese concepts of *honne* and *tatemae*, seen as the ability to exercise two personalities, a public one and a private one, and to regard this flexibility as an essential human quality rather than a personality fault. In contrast to monumentalism, who you are depends on where and with whom you happen to be. Flexhumility also affects the level of assertiveness that one is willing to exercise in conversation, or even in scoring items at the extremes on a Likert scale. These dimensions are then examined from a perspective of absolutist vs. flexible religious traditions, with Judaism Christianity and Islam on one end of the scale and Hinduism and Buddhism on the other.

Other factors implicated in these dimensional comparisons include gender roles, educational achievement, and economic growth. As in the previous chapter the author ends with a summary and table of differences between societies at either end of this dimensional continuum, and again offers an examination of how cultural differences arise here, pointing to such factors as differences in education, the role of national wealth, residual effects of historical relationships to the environment, this latter is speculated to be weightier than one might imagine.

In Chapter Five we find the fourth dimensional polarity: *Hypometropia vs. Prudence*. The online *Dictionary of Difficult Words* defines hypometropia as "shortsightedness." It refers, in this context, not to the need for wearing corrective lenses, but to the myopic propensity for not taking seriously the consequences of certain actions or situations. I found it strange that a pathology should be actually chosen as the name of one pole of a dimension.

The author introduces the subject by looking at the phenomenon of violence. Here it is civil violence that is meant and is statistically correlated with other factors. Civil violence should not be confused with country level threats and behaviors such as that once diplomatically articulated by a prominent US spokesperson, "We will bomb you back to the Stone Age!" One wonders how the scales would look if one examined the politics of violence on the tribal, ethnic and national levels and practices of carpet bombing, spraying defoliants and launching drone missiles.

The author dismisses socioeconomic inequalities as an adequate explanation for differences in levels of violence, preferring to look at its correlation with such things as adolescent fertility rates, teenage childbearing and HIV, in other words attaching it to how well reproductive instincts are acted upon. Bizarre as this may sound, the author ultimately connects all of this with a cultural shortsightedness that sacrifices the individual for the long-term survival of the society. Further discussions address related outcomes and practices, e.g., life expectancy, murder rates, rape and assault, HIV incidence via sexual networking, adolescent fertility and sex, promiscuity, spouse age preference, delayed gratification, intelligence and education, along with competitiveness and social inequality.

As before the author concludes by more succinctly defining this cultural dimension and looking for the origins of the cultural differences found within it. Again, a table contrasts the behaviors and contexts characteristic of each pole of the dimension. In exploring the causality of these differences the author discusses national wealth, life expectancy, legacies of slavery, discrimination and environmental subsistence patterns, the numerical ratio of men to women in a society, parasites

and infectious diseases, and posits as questionable certain biological differences such as left and right-handedness, finger length, male sensitivity to testosterone, the size of male testicles, twinning rates all of which await some future academic consensus. Finally, there is a page and a half discussing research about the origins of cultural differences in mathematical intelligence asking whether these differences are biologically founded. This includes the results of the study claiming that Ashkenazi Jews possess superior intelligence due to both biological factors and their medieval roll as moneylenders. Did these bio-cultural successes favor their ability to produce more offspring bearing their genetic endowment?

The fourth and last of Minkov's dimensions, *Exclusionism vs. Universalism*, is explored in Chapter Six. The author notes that the three previous dimensions were associated with national wealth. In order to proceed with this dimension, he starts by trying to deal with the ambiguities that have developed around individualism and collectivism, currently the most used and abused of Hofstede's original dimensions. Many of the expectations surrounding this dimension and its application have simply not been verified, hence the search for a new more meaningful event-focused dimension for explaining what seem to be at present inconsistent results.

With some reflections on pedestrian traffic behavior to introduce the theme, the author segues into a presentation of his fourth dimension, which is focused on how people treat other people. Correlations are raised that closely associate such factors as the percentage of people living with their parents, transparency vs. corruption indices, and road deaths. These do correlate with the traditional individualism vs. collectivism indexes, privilege being associated with more impoverished cultures that tend to have higher familial cohabitation and greater exclusion of outsiders, while richer societies are likely to insist on more universal egalitarian treatment of both family and strangers. This precises collectivism as "collective treatment of people" and individualism as "treatment of people as individuals". In exclusionism the stronger the familial ties the greater the neglect of the interests of strangers. Universalism signals its opposite.

The author explores this polarity further by looking at tribal development and the role of in-group and out-group behavior with examples from several societies. He provides anecdotal evidence of consideration or lack thereof toward strangers as well as toward the common environment. The polarity is further described in its effects on racism, political correctness, and corruption. It's description includes a preference for the universalist rule of law, along with concerns for safety and security both in the enforcement of operational procedures and the creation of consumer goods. It also affects the reliability of agreements and time commitments, politeness, directness, how language is structured in communication, and the level of life satisfaction. This chapter concludes like all the others, with a definition and summary, a listing of and guesses about the causes of the distinctions.

In Chapter Seven, Minkov attempts to construct a cultural map of the world which takes into account all four dimensions. He proposes two mega dimensions that are designed to include the data of all four. His mapping yields a set of seven cultural regions: Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab World and the Middle East, South Asia, Eastern Europe, East Asia, Western Europe and the Anglo

World, and finally, Latin America. He discusses in some detail the cultural orientation of each of these regional groupings in the light of his dimensional model.

The final Chapter is a scant two and a half pages. It lists twelve principles which are meant to conclude and summarize the work of the volume and its implications for the understanding of and future study of culture. Fluctuations of economy seem to be at the root of six of the principles he enunciates, perhaps an indicator that the current work is meant to be applied in commercial decision-making, though at the moment it appears simply to be a concatenation of suggestive empirical research results structured around the four new dimensions the author has crafted.

In sum, what concerns the reader most in these dimensional comparisons is that they either subtly promote or, at least, are likely to be read in the patronizing framework of a Western bourgeois morality. Cultural characteristics identified with and rich Western societies are likely to be compared positively against non-Western and poor cultures. Capitalism and neocolonialism seem to be the songs one hears playing in the background. The author does warn that those of us on the universalistic pole are likely to be shocked by and find quite sinister the indicators connecting certain biological factors with violence. He is right. Perhaps we should think seriously of purging the human race of left-handed and short fingered people before it is too late.

My opening question was, "Is this the dying gasp of the essentialist approach to studying and teaching about cultures, or will it be a bridge that connects where we have come from with where we need to go?" The answer is not so clear, mainly because the book never refers again to the dilemmas of globalization and multiculturalism with which it opens, perhaps assuming, but never explicitly concluding that economic development is the silver bullet needed to slay our malaise. It leaves the reader awash in suggestive interpretations of research results with little conclusive evidence. One asks whether this kind of dimensional thinking explains or is simply one more product of the cultural context it has helped to create. I am tempted to say that *Cultural Differences in a Globalizing World* is monumentalist in methodology, and flexhumble in interpretation.