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Correspondence between cultural practices and adaptation of personality in the university environment in Bulgaria¹

Mayiana Mitevka-Encheva

State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Bulgaria

Abstract

Cultural practices in an academic environment provide conditions for the personality to function; they set behavioral norms that are seen as normal ways to act. Functioning in a certain environment suggests optimal adaptation of the personality to this environment. The survey was conducted between February and May 2015 among 394 students in three Bulgarian state universities. Two questionnaires were used: Karabeliova on the one hand (Karabeliova, 2011) for measuring cultural practices based on individualism versus collectivism, distance to power, avoiding uncertainty and on the other hand Velichkov, Petkov and Radoslavova's questionnaire on Adapting personality to a social environment (Velichkov, Petkov and Radoslavova, 2005). The survey aims to discover the influence of cultural practices in an academic environment on students' adaptation, carried out through a regression analysis. The data have been processed by SPSS 21. The survey results show that cultural practices influence students' adaptation in an academic environment but that influence is too specific, whereas cultural practices have a different reflection on separate aspects of adaptation.

Keywords: cultural practices, adaptation, academic environment, optimal functioning

1. Introduction

The individual's functioning in any environment is determined by many factors. Some of them are recognized and perceived as influential and most of them influence individual behavior subconsciously. To these factors can be added the imposed by circumstances limitations, written and unwritten norms of behavior, cooperation, respectively competition among colleagues, the impact of the leaders of the organization in accordance with their leadership style, environment and organizational culture, existing and constantly evolving cultural practices, organizational conflicts in various stages of development - establishment, overcoming, solution and dying out, adaptation processes and activity satisfaction in the organization. In the current study, due to a

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number of limitations, cultural practices have been analyzed as one of the key factors for the adaptation of individuals to the organizational environment.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Cultural practices integrate the shared values and dominant beliefs transforming themselves into a system of norms that guide people's behavior and determine value orientations, but also constitute a solution to the newly-emerged problems (Hofstede, 2001). "In order to understand why people and organizations operate in a particular way, it is important to understand the meanings that they attribute to the environment ... there are a number of ways, some of which are culturally more effective and appropriate ... and can be used to avoid losses and achieve mutual benefits." (Karabeliova, 2011, p. 269). This gives grounds to extract information about people's values, while observing general perceptions and their daily activities. Cultural practices can be distinguished from one another in the same socio-cultural context, but may be preferred in a different order (Trompenaars, F. Hampden-Turner, C., 2004). In this aspect, cultural practices in specific academic environment would differ from those in other types of organizations, not only in the different arrangement, but also in their specific way of manifestation. Cultural practices express the values and rules the "mental programs" of a system (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner, 2004). Moreover, they are the "correct" order of solving problems (Kluckhohn, & Strodtbeck, 1961).

Adaptation is the adjustment of humans to the requirements existing in a specific environment as well as the evaluation, norm and value criteria. In this sense, the common ground between cultural practices and the adaptation of personality emerges on the one hand in the correlation between personal needs and values and whatever conditions are available in the environment for their implementation; on the other hand – they reflect the correlation between environmental demands and the available skills of the individual. The adaptation of personality is conceptualized on the complex correlation between the internal conditions of the individual and the existing social relations of the environment, the state of balance of the personality with the social community and the internal perception of the realities of social life (Gradev, 1976). Adaptation is seen as a state of optimal functioning of the individual in an environment, which allows the individual to reach their goals with the objectives of the environment, to preserve their values in accordance with the values of the environment. It manifests as a collective cognitive-affective evaluation of the established relationships between the individual and the social environment. The processes of adaptation are realized by seeking a balance between the requirements of the individual and the answers to those requirements provided by the environment. One of the significant aspects of the correlation between cultural practices and adaptation are the characteristics and the work content of as well as the characteristics of the individual for adaptation to the environment. Popular theories in organizational psychology on the correlation between the individual and the environment (Tziner, 1983; Kulik et al, 1987 by Encyclopedia of Special Education, 2007; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987 on Human Resource Management Ethics; Caplan, 2006) emphasize the coincidence between the individual and the group of people in a given environment, but also the coincidence of the talents and abilities of the individual and the needs of the environment taking into account the relative nature of the process. Adaptation is also seen as an overlap between personality and situation, dynamic equilibrium between the cognitive structures of the individual and the state of the environment (Hettinga, Kenrick, 1989; Hettinga, Deary, 2013).

It is assumed that adaptation is the state of well-being of the individual, which includes the following components: satisfaction with being in the environment, social competence, a sense of belonging, coping with stressful situations, physical health and prevailing emotional states (Tanaka et al., 1994). On the other hand, the absence of adaptation involves severely limiting the personal behavior regulation to external environment factors. Then the behavior is directed to absorbing external constraints more than establishing a state of optimal functioning of the individual in the social environment (Velichkov, Petkov Radoslavova, 2002).

3. Methodology

The survey covers 394 people, broken down by demographics indexes “sex” (male - 44.6%, female - 55.4%); “Educational Degree” (BA - 81%, MA - 19%). Two methods were used specifically designed for measuring the cultural practices and adaptation of personality in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context.

The questionnaire for measuring the customary cultural practices builds on the theoretical and empirical model for studying the parameters of the dominant cultural practices of X. Hofstede (Hofstede, 1984), where he identifies five dimensions of national cultures (power distance individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, avoiding uncertainty and long-term versus short-term orientation). S. Karabeliova (Karabeliova, 2011) conducted two national representative surveys in 2000 and 2005 based on the model of X. Hofstede in which Bulgarian cultural practices are oriented to supporting the large power distance, domination of individualistic values, strong avoidance of uncertainty and short-term orientation to the past.

It has been taken into consideration that the differentiation of social gender stereotypes in Bulgarian culture consists of predominantly feminine attitudes and behaviors. Compared with men, women have higher scores on the masculinity scale (Silgidzhiyan, Karabeliova et al., 2007). The value choices of the representative survey conducted in 2005 showed relative stability on the indicators such as “power distance”, “individualism against collectivism” and “avoiding uncertainty” (Karabeliova, Silgidzhiyan, 2005).

This allows the authors of both studies to suggest a theoretical and empirical model for the Bulgarian environment based on the use of three of the five dimensions. It contains 17 pairs of opposite claims, arranged at both ends of a scale from “1” to “5” with the following differentiated scales:

- *Distance to power* - the extent to which inequality in organizational environment is considered natural. Dominant practices supporting the shortest distance to power, the opinion of employees is important to managers and the changes are introduced after consultation with the people at lower levels. Prevailing practices in an environment that supports the great distance to the power, management style is directive and the authority of the leader is not questioned. The Index of the dimension “distance to power” ranges from 0 to 100% and 50% is considered little distance to power whereas over 50% counts as big.

- *Individualism versus collectivism* (orientation to the task against orientation to relationships) - on the one hand this reflects the extent to which people are predisposed mainly to achieving their individual goals or to achieving the objectives of the team and then their own goals; on the other hand this shows the extent to which people are oriented primarily to the execution of tasks or the concern about fruitful team communication. The Index of the dimension “Individualism versus collectivism” ranges from 0 to 100, where below 50 is considered domination of collectivist practices, and over 50 counts as individualistic.

- *Avoiding uncertainty* – indicates the extent to which people feel insecure or threatened in the organizational environment; exact compliance with the procedures versus the achievement of excellence; numerous rules versus a framework of few but compliant rules. The index of the dimension “avoiding uncertainty” ranges from 0 to 100, where below 50 is little avoidance, and over 50 counts as strong avoidance.

The method for the study of adaptation (Velichkov, Petkov Radoslavova, 2002) was developed on the model of the existing literature approaches to empirical and operational behavior (Ryff, 1989; 1995) using individual incentives from dimensions of mental well-being to measure the adaptation to a particular social environment. In accordance with the accepted understanding of adaptation as a state of optimal functioning are established the following six scales:

- Acceptance of yourself, which describes the degree of experiential sense of self esteem as a result of the function in the environment
- Personal growth, which reveals opportunities for self-development and self-improvement that the environment offers.
- Life-time goals, which shows that opportunities the environment provides for the establishment and pursuit of long-term goals and life plans.
- Autonomy, which examines the experiences of independence in thinking and behavior, inherent to the individual in the environment.
- Control over the environment, revealing the capabilities which the individual has to control the course of events and the functioning of the environment.
- Positive relationships, which examines feelings of empathy and affection and establishing close relationships of individuals in the environment.

The method contains 50 indicators that describe how individuals feel in a given environment, i.e. they evaluate the degree of adaptation to the social environment; the method has been adapted to diagnose groups. Responses are measured by a five-point scale for the intensity of the experiences. All scales show high and relatively stable consistency reliability. The discrimination validity of the method is verified by comparing the average scores on scales of military and student circles and is reported as high, which makes it sensitive to the specifics of adaptation in different social environments.

The study aims to determine the impact of substantive components of the typical cultural practices in an academic environment on the level of subjective mental well-being in adapting the academic community to it. In light of the foresaid it can be assumed that functioning in an environment of cultural practices, each of which taken individually and complexly, influence the individual behavior by alleviating respectively hampering the process of adaptation to the environment. The mental well-being of the individual in the social environment depends on the correlation between the motivational trends and the opportunities of meeting them and their optimal functioning; they reflect the major trends in personal behavior regulation. (Brandstatter, Elias, 2001).

Different social backgrounds may not provide full opportunities for achieving a state of optimal functioning and adaptation is often partial. The outlined aspects of personality adaptation reflect some fundamental trends of personal regulation. There are numerous studies on the positive effects of the establishment of personal control over the course of events. The role of the

establishment of personal control has been repeatedly emphasized by various researchers in recent decades (Baltes, Baltes, 2014) and still continues to receive empirical evidence of the psychological importance of personal control in different problematic situations (Thompson et al., 1993 in Kobeissy, 2015).

Numerous empirical and theoretical studies also demonstrate the importance of autonomy for the optimal functioning of the individual and the deployment of its potential (Deci, Ryan, 1985; Schwalbe, 1985, 2012). Empirical data show that the pursuit of long-term goals is also a prerequisite for optimal performance and realization, which in turn are associated with positive emotional states (Emmons, 1986 by Shah, Gardner, 2008). Long-term goals serve as organizing principles that help individuals put their achievements into a unified whole. When people adapt to a social environment they have set long-term goals that must be achieved and which give meaning to their general behavior. The importance of personal growth in the structure of adaptation arises from the need for self-realization and continued development of personal competence. The above aspects of optimum personal performance may also be based on other needs, such as the need of influence, independence, belonging, etc.

The outlined aspects of adaptation are of fundamental significance to the full functioning of the individual in a social environment. If they are not carried out, the person appears more or less excluded from the regulatory process, because they are not able to freely maintain and develop their behavioral repertoire and intellectual resources and therefore be effective in pursuing his/her objectives and preserving self-esteem. In this sense it can be said that adaptation reflects the extent to which individual behavior in a social environment is personally regulated. Therefore, in certain cases we might talk about a partial adaptation, such as when there are conditions for personal growth and acceptance of oneself, but events in the environment are not subject to personal control. We speak of incomplete adaptation, where a state of optimal functioning can only be partially achieved, or there is a lack of adaptation (Velichkov, Petkov Radoslavova, 2002).

4. Results

Distance to power in this study used six pairs of alternative propositions. The overall index is 54%, which defines the usual cultural practices supporting the understanding that management applies consensual management style. The highest percentage is of people who support the view that those who manage want to hear people's opinions, even if it is different from them (55.9%), while only a third of the respondents believe that contradictions in the introduction of changes are not allowed. Practices are generally maintained that changes are introduced after consultation with the people. Nearly half of people believe that their opinion is taken into account by the manager. Supported was the view that management does not hinder the initiative and innovation. On the other hand this shows correspondence with the managers' opinion and high motivation amongst people to perform tasks and responsibility without depriving them of their ability to steer processes in the organization.

In the academic circles being surveyed students and tutors "learn" from their good results (36.4%) as much as only pointing to the mistakes (30.4%). Organizational and social improvements largely facilitate activities, increase the motivation to work and improve efficiency. These results indicate that cultural practices support the short distance to power with a high degree of independence, a strong need for achievement, good results, initiative and responsibility.

Cultural practices in opposition “individualism – collectivism” are defined as: “Individualism is inherent in societies where there is no close link between individuals – each one is expected to care for themselves and their immediate surroundings ... collectivism is typical of societies in which since their birth an individual has been integrated into strong, internally united groups that continue to protect this person throughout his/her life in exchange for unconditional loyalty” (Karabeliova, 2011).

Other important features of individualism are for example: direct communication, conflict management as a natural part of the overall business, family relationships in the workplace are considered undesirable and are avoided. Collectivistic cultural practices include, for example, loyalty to the group and the distribution of resources among members, the leader is seen as a “father”, there is absolute loyalty and devotion, taking into account the social background and family background as family ties are preferred in the workplace because they are thought to reduce the risk of failure and are a source of high efficiency, i.e. personal relationships dominate the work, as opposed to individualistic ones, where work dominates personal relationships.

The overall index of the next studied dimension “Individualism versus collectivism” is 65, which determines the socio-psychological characteristics of cultural practices as prevalently individualistic. Likewise is perceived the environment in terms of great pressure for the work to be done in time - only 9%. A dominant cultural practice in the surveyed universities is accepted to be the “pressure for work to be done” (64.1%) against the “completing the work comes second” - 13.2% and neutral - 22.7%. Those surveyed from university tend to accept that little attention is paid to personal problems (60.5%). Another key feature, according to tutors and students about cultural practices in their universities is the social status – it is acquired “based on performance, not because of age” (48.6%). Besides, however, a greater hiring chance for people is being from a suitable family or a social class (46.4%), typical of collectivist tradition against individualistic, where professional competence is the only criterion for recruitment (30.5%). The cultural practice to reach agreement and avoid competition is supported by 37.7 % of the respondents. This result shows that the surveyed universities also support collectivistic cultural practices and the related human behavior. Typical of the individualistic perception of performance is the result of distributing rewards – they are determined based on individual performance (45.6%). According to the survey, individualistic values are the foundation of success and they largely lead to prosperity and welfare. At the same time, 37.7% of the respondents believe it is important to pursue agreement and compete fairly against adopting “confrontation as something positive and leading to progress” (27.7%).

Avoiding uncertainty is defined as “... the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain and unfamiliar situations. The experience of uncertainty is expressed in nervous stress and in the need for predictability – the need for written and unwritten rules” (Karabeliova, 2011). Socio-psychological characteristics of cultural practices are sought in whether people avoid indefinite situations, whether they perceive the structures and the rules of the workplace as clearly defined, institutions and relationships, whether unpredictability is regarded as a normal feature of the environment.

The overall index is 52, which defines the typical cultural practices in the surveyed universities such as low tolerance towards uncertainty and relatively high levels of stress, as well as the need for precise rules and compliance with the order.

Customary cultural practices with strong uncertainty avoidance prefer specific detailed objectives and a large number of clear rules set by competent managers. This is a way to avoid anxiety and stress. In these situations, conservatism and resistance to innovation are also characteristic. Conversely, on weak unpredictability avoidance – changes are perceived as a normal feature of life; it is also socially unacceptable for emotions to be shown and there is no need for many formal rules, but those that exist are largely respected. According to the survey results, cultural practices support “the existence of only a few rules that must be complied with” (56.4%), while the opposite view is perceived by 23.2%. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that “the most important thing is to meet the needs of the consumer”(48.5%), while the opposite statement – “the most important thing is just to follow the procedures” is supported by 27.3 percent of the respondents. A significant difference was found regarding the job loss concern (“People feel secure about their workplace.” – 43, 2% against 17.7% saying “People constantly fear losing their jobs”). The data show that the majority of the respondents agree that the correct procedures are more important than the results (46.4%) at the expense of the results (29.5%). However, the dominant cultural practices fit mainly in the area of weak uncertainty avoidance.

There is also a perception that examines the environment as a structure of opportunities for purposeful behavior. It focuses on the relationship between the behavioral requirements of the active, purposeful individual and the peculiarities of the environment. Data show that autonomy is the most preferred aspect of adaptation ($x = 3.08$; $sd = 0.73$), by which the individual manages to achieve independence in their thinking, to participate in the preparation of important development projects and offer ideas that in turn is probably provoked by the specifics of the academic environment in general. According to research conducted in 2002 (Velichkov, Petkov Radoslavova, 2002) in a similar environment in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context in terms of autonomy there is essential dynamics – now it is moving to the fore in the respondents’ preferences. A significant shift in the hierarchy of the adaptation elements has occurred in the last ten years. Opportunities for self-development and self-improvement have significantly changed – from the element occupying the first position they have given way to autonomy. The same statement applies to long-term objectives which the individual has set and achieved by operating in the environment ($x = 2.78$; $sd = 0.66$). Only positive relations as part of a successful adaptation have retained their forward position over the years. Thus, interpersonal communication does not impede the autonomy and innovation, because it is perceived as positive, provokes sympathy to the others’ problems, affection and establishing close relationships between individuals in the environment ($x = 3.03$; $sd = 0.56$).

The opportunity to monitor individual physical and cognitive environment is one of the important conditions to feel good in it, i.e. to be adapted. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the data from this study place “control” third in the hierarchy of the aspects of the adaptive process ($x = 2.92$; $sd = 0.57$). The degree of experienced sense of dignity and self-esteem as a result of functioning in the environment ($x = 2.86$; $sd = 0.57$), as well as opening opportunities for personal expression that it provides ($x = 2.84$; $sd = 0.53$) are the weakest harmonizing elements in the process of adaptation. Perhaps the dynamics of the dominant elements of adaptation follows the changes in the external cultural context. To put this hypothesis to the test, regression analysis was made to take account of the significant impacts of existing environment cultural practices on the adaptation elements. This hypothesis is built on the understanding that adaptation is a two-way process of interaction in the course of which changes occur both in the perception of the personality of the environment and changes in the environment itself, particularly in the dominant

cultural practices, norms, rules and values. Therefore, cultural practices are expected to have an impact as an environment factor on the adaptation elements.

The study uses the method of multiple step regression. The first step data are the most important. The lack of a certain variable is measured in situations of mutual influence. The regression coefficient (Standardized Coefficients) is β – Beta. Data on standardized and non-standardized β -coefficients of the variables and the degree of importance are given. Based on standardized β -coefficients, direct comparison and assessment of the relative weight of each variable becomes possible. Since several dependent variables are used, an additional factor R^2 – R Square is introduced. The statistical process whereby this hypothesis can be verified involves the construction of a regression equation with an independent variable “cultural dimensions” and dependent variables “aspects of adaptation”.

Table 1. Influence of cultural practices on adaptation

Cultural practices - dimensions	Aspects of adaptation			
	R ²	Beta	T	p
	Personal growth			
Distance to power	.21	.20	3.54	.000
	Lifelong goals			
Individualism versus collectivism	.30	.30	5.38	.000
	Autonomy			
Individualism versus collectivism	.32	.30	3.87	.000
Avoiding uncertainty		-.15	-2.32	.021
	Control over environment			
Individualism versus collectivism	.21	.21	3.72	.000

The analysis showed that on two aspects – acceptance of oneself and positive relationships, cultural practices, even if they do have an impact, it is diluted among other social factors. The table above only shows significant influences of cultural practices on aspects of adaptation. Acceptance of oneself is obviously an element of the overall adaptive process of the individual, which is fueled by deeper, basic personality formations found in early childhood. Psychological courage, formed in childhood, makes them more resistant to cultural influences, particularly where the latter affect in a negative direction. Moreover, mentally strong individuals are people who carry the culture over time; they support it and develop it. Basic and persistent personal formations participating in personal regulation, cause positive, respectively negative reactions to others and as the results of the analysis show, to a small extent, they are insignificantly affected by cultural practices exerted in the environment.

“The distance to power” only affects personal growth or social inequality as a dimension reflects the wide range of answers to the basic question of how respondents relate to the fact that they are

equal and at the same time how they can express themselves in the given environment (Beta = 0.20). The precise coefficient of determination is ($R^2 = 0.21$), which means that the distance to the power explains 21% of the adaptation in the specific academic environment. Distance to power is defined as “the extent to which weaker members of the academic environment accept the unequal distribution of power” regardless of the level of functioning in the community. The analysis of cultural practices in the academic environment shows that small distance to power is supported with a high degree of independence and a strong need for achievement. The hierarchical system is seen as an inequality of roles, established for convenience. Value systems of members with less power are the basis of the distance-to-power explanation. The behavior of the stronger members accounts for the distribution of power and less control over the execution itself. In cultures with little distance to power people in a subordinate position expect to consult stronger members before taking a decision, being aware that the final decision lies with the manager. However, according to the survey data this has a positive impact on the opportunities for self-development and self-improvement that the environment provides.

The study showed that as for the applied academic environment individualist / collectivist cultural practices, influence was observed on three of the six elements of adaptation: the life goals (Beta = 0.30; $R^2 = 0.30$), the autonomy (Beta = 0.32; $R^2 = 0.30$) and the control of the environment (Beta = 0.21; $R^2 = 0.21$). It can be considered that direct communication and close links between individuals positively influence the setting and the pursuit of long-term goals and life plans; this also helps independent thinking and sharing of opinion and reveals opportunities to control the course of events and the functioning in the environment.

At the same time avoiding uncertainty affects negatively the autonomy (Beta = 0.32; $R^2 = -0.15$) and this can be explained by the feeling of threat due to uncertain and unknown situations. And since cultural practices in this dimension are registered as strong uncertainty avoidance, the uncertain situations and many rules threaten the autonomy of the individual as an element of adaptation.

5. Discussion and Implications

Based on the conducted empirical research it was found that Bulgarian academic environment cultural practices are predominantly individualistic and allow the implementation of a consensual management in making decisions on changes, which means that people are encouraged above all to achieve their individual goals and then to achieve the objectives of the team. Security of the work is framed by a few rules to be respected, but respect for hierarchical status avoids the uncertainty and insecurity in the academic environment. The preferred elements for successful adaptation to the environment are associated with the recognition of the autonomy of the individual and tend to build positive interpersonal relationships.

The hypothesis of the influence of each cultural practice on adaptation was partially confirmed. In the relation „cultural practices – adaptation” positive effects are outlined of individualistic orientations on the vital objectives, on the environment control and on autonomy as a way to adapt. Cultural practices, supporting large distance to power have a significant positive influence on personal growth as one of the major adaptive elements. Proximity to other significant ones, to the managers provides greater opportunities for both the individual to be spotted and developed as well as for the individual him/herself at a higher level to benefit from power and environment resources. Striving for a better regulation in the environment functioning, more written rules, in other words “strong uncertainty avoidance” adversely affects the formation of separate and

independent behavior, i.e. autonomy as an element of adaptation. As is clear, not all cultural practices affect all aspects of adaptation. Since the latter is a complex condition of the individual in which different in content cognitive structures are intertwined accompanied by the experience of emotions different in strength, it is only a culturally balanced environment, i.e. participation of all the practices in the corresponding proportion of the situation, may affect the majority of the studied aspects of adaptation of personality to the specific environment. In other words, the optimal functioning of the individual in the academic environment can be due to many factors, but in the aspect of cultural influences being studied in this research, each of the analyzed cultural practices has its share of complex influences on the individual so that he or she feels satisfied with their position in the academic environment in order to be able to develop their personal potential, to plan and implement life-long plans, to be in agreement with themselves, to feel autonomous and in control of the environment, which provides conditions for personal growth and enables him/her to develop positive relationships with others.

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