INFLUENCE OF CORE CULTURAL VALUES ON THE COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOUR OF STAFF IN LIBYAN ORGANISATION

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Abstract

This paper aims to critically review previous studies on the influence of culture on the communication behaviour of staff in Libyan organisations, in order to find deficiencies in this field and to examine the future research focus on this issue. Specifically, it considers recent studies investigating the influence of cultural values on communication in Libyan organisations. The article starts with general definitions of culture, communication behaviours, organisation, and organisational culture. Previous studies of the influence of national Libyan cultural values on the communication behaviour of individuals in organisations are then considered. This literature shows that Libyan culture exhibits high power distance, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. It is also characterised by low individualism.

Key words: culture, Libyan culture, communication behaviours, organisational culture, Hofstede’s dimensions

Introduction

The theoretical and institutional field of cultural studies has developed over the past three decades, during which time various problems, issues and debates have emerged from within the literature. Thus, this review considers the impact of Libyan culture on the communication behaviour of individuals in Libyan organisations.
In this paper the recent cultural studies are examined in order to investigate the impact of societal culture on communication among staff in Libyan organisations and to advise future research on this issue. It analyses to what extent power distance, masculinity, collectivism and uncertainty avoidance affect the communication behaviours of individuals, in terms of harmony and organisational hierarchy structure in Libyan organisations.

**Definition of culture**

For anthropologists, culture is the umbrella which covers all the patterns of our social activities, and it has a serious impact on our behaviour, communication, relationships and other social patterns. Therefore, the literature always emphasizes the importance of culture. Although this is defined in different ways, it is usually strongly connected with communication. For instance, Hall (1969, p. 20) defines culture as: “the way of life of a people. It is the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things”. He also considers that culture is a code that we learn and share; this learning and sharing requires communication.

Moreover, in recent years, the American Psychological Association (2002) defines culture as, “the belief system and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes (language, care taking practice, media and educational systems) and organisations (media, educational system)”. Thus, culture in the societal level is manifest in values and less in practice. However, culture in the organisational level is more likely to be in practice and less in values (Hofstede, 1997). Therefore, in many business studies and training programmes that are now available, courses in cultural communications are
included, which generally provide models of culture and cross-cultural communication skills (Graf, 2004).

**Communication behaviours**

Since every cultural pattern and every single act of social behaviour involves communication, communication is widely studied as a means of transmitting ideas and as part of culture (Jandt, 2004). In classifying communication, Ferraro (1990, p. 45) says that it can be divided into three types: “verbal (use of words with specific meanings), paraverbal (tone of the voice), and non-verbal communication”. It also has various components, such as, encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding and receiver response in achieving success in communication (Jandt, 2004). Therefore, communication behaviour is divided into verbal and non-verbal communication.

**Verbal communication**

Communication is strongly related to culture, so different cultures have different definitions and strategies of communication. Thus, Jandt (2004, p. 29) says that in Western culture the process of verbal communication is described as, “involving a speaker, the speech act, an audience, and a purpose”. He also adds that the philosophy of Confucius defines communication as, “an infinite interpretive process where all parties are searching to develop and maintain a social relationship” (Jandt, 2004, p. 38). Communication is strongly related to culture, and culture cannot be understood without the study of communication and vice versa.

In spite of the fact that the main element of communication is language, and all languages are similar in linguistic structure, they may express different cultural aspects (Fisher, 1978). Thus Wray and Grace (2007) think that cultural diversity plays
an important role in misunderstanding in exoteric communication. This brings us to
the conclusion that each culture seems to have its own characteristics, which lead to
various studies and approaches to communication. The understanding of the hearer is
the responsibility of the speaker, who usually takes further steps to clarify his
message. Therefore, the understanding of the cultural background of the listener and
the clarity of the message has an important role in facilitating communication (Jandt,
2004).

**Non-verbal communication**

Non-verbal communication implies emotions, attitudes and feelings shown in
different gestures and motions, and these may be conveyed unintentionally by facial
expressions, gestures, and body language (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). Body
language has a strong impact on communication between people from different
cultures. For example, in Libyan culture most people unintentionally use facial
expressions to express fear, sadness, happiness, and surprise (Twati, 2006). These
facial expressions are less likely to be recognised by people who are from different
cultural backgrounds (Samovar and Porter, 2004).

Therefore, many theories provide various approaches to facilitating
communication between different discourse systems. One approach is to increase
shared knowledge, which aims to find out more about the cultural background of the
people we communicate with. Moreover, the miscommunication approach deals with
misunderstandings and considers these to be prevalent in professional communication
(Scollon and Scollon, 2001). The face saving strategy is one of the main approaches
in Libyan communication. This may be due to Libyan societal structure, because in
Libyan organisations, employees care about the reputation of their names, families
and tribes. Therefore, social reputation is a very important element for societal relationships in Libyan society (Twati, 2006).

**Organisation**

The study of organisation systematically started just after the second world war in the USA and then in Europe. In the beginning organisational studies concentrated on moral bases of management, leadership and the dynamism of bureaucracy. Then in the second half of the last century there were different studies about organisational structure, activities and the relationship between organisation and their communities (Boden, 1994). In Libya, communist public organisational systems are adopted in many sectors, such as business, education, health, and media; in addition to other social and political organisations.

The organisational development in developed countries leads many organisations in developing countries to adopt Western models without considering local cultural values, as is the case with Libya. This leads to conflict between organisational values and national values (Al-Hamadi et al, 2007). Therefore, the allure of globalisation has affected most organisations in Libya. It has also created huge debate about organisational values and the methods of dealing with social issues in Libyan organisations. In terms of education, Libyan universities are considered new organisations in Libyan society. Therefore, in the early 1970s there were few women who went to university. However, nowadays Libyan universities have more women than men especially in the humanities and social sciences fields. This is due to cultural change and the need for education in Libyan society (Twati, 2006).
**Organisational culture**

Since each organisation has its own cultural patterns, Hyde and Williamson (2000) define organisational culture as, “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the organisation asserts are important as guides to the way people should behave to solve its problems of external adaptation and internal integration to achieve its goals and objectives”. As a result, communication aims to achieve the goals and objectives in organisations. Moreover, this communication allows members of the organisation to exchange information to fulfil their tasks (Lee, 2005).

Thus, the employees in organisations work between two systems of values; their cultural background values system and the organisational values system, both of which usually share the same values but to achieve different objectives. For example, loyalty to a group is an important cultural value in Libyan society; on the other hand, loyalty to the organisation is also an important value in organisational culture. Therefore, such value will affect the communication behaviours of individuals in the organisation (Hyde and Williamson, 2000). Therefore, due to national cultural influences, Twati and Gammack (2004) consider organisational culture in Libya as a strong culture, which resists organisational change in many ways, including the decision making process, communication, employment, professionalism and other aspects.

**Libyan culture**

Libya is an Arab country and shares common cultural values, language, religion and other social values with the Arab countries. In Libya the official language is Arabic and the dominant religion is Islam. This religion has a serious role in shaping Libyan cultural values (Vandewalle, 2006). This leads many authors to
generalise their cultural studies on all of the Arab countries, which leads to generalisations in cultural studies and about Libyan culture in particular.

In Libyan society, Islam is considered a comprehensive religion covering social and political aspects as well as piety of the soul and the moral principles of people’s behaviour (Twati, 2006). According to the Islamic work ethics, hard work and the respect of people in the place of work are considered virtues. Therefore, social relations at work are also encouraged. Thus, it is important to have good relationships with your colleagues and leaders, because links inside and outside work can be vital elements in achieving successful communication among staff (Yousef, 2001).

The idea of a common humanity is a central belief in Islam. Thus it is mentioned in the Koran that God created people from different tribes and nations to know and appreciate each other. Consequently, Muslims know that they must embrace even those who may not belong to their community, religion, or nation (Akbar, 2003). This supports the views of Leat and El-Kot (2007), who argued that harmony and the maintenance of social relationships are very important characteristics of Arabic culture. Hence, respect, establishing and maintaining relationships with strangers are strongly recommended in Arabic culture. Therefore, due to Islamic culture, Libyan society has strong social ties and consists of different tribes and families (Twati, 2006).

In studies of culture, national culture has an important role in forming the characteristics of society’s members from an early age. Furthermore, the existence and stability of national cultural values over long periods is due to them being transmitted from one generation to another (Hofstede, 2001), so we cannot get rid of them easily. In addition, these values are considered as a type of belief concerned with what is good or desirable. They also motivate behaviour and guide evaluations
and decisions (Hyde and Williamson, 2000). Thus, individuals are expected to act according to these values. Consequently, these are reasons for some of these studies to assume that this religion affected Libyan culture, the communication behaviour of employees and the organisational culture in Libyan society.

**Libyan culture and Hofstede’s dimensions**

The IBM study is considered to be one of the most important studies on the relation between Libyan cultural values and organisational culture in Libyan organisations. The influence of Libyan culture can be seen in the findings of Hofstede in the IBM study. Hofstede’s research shows how national culture affects the values of the organisations in a society. The IBM study was conducted in different nations and it compared work-related values across different cultures according to four dimensions, which are:

- **Power distance**: refers to “the extent to which the less powerful individuals in institutions expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98).
- **Individualism versus Collectivism**: “Individualism stands for a society in which everyone is expected to look after him/herself and her/his immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225).
- **Uncertainty avoidance**: this is related to the extent to which people in a culture respond to different unknown social situations (Hofstede, 1980).
- **Masculinity versus femininity**: deals with gender division in the society.

This study examined the attitudes held by employees in IBM branches, in three regions and fifty countries, of which Libya was one. According to this study,
Libyan culture is characterised by high power distance, high masculinity, high uncertainty avoidance and low individualism. According to Hofstede, all these factors have contributed negatively to the communication among staff in the decision making process. He argues that most of the appointed managers in this region held high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, which affect decisions and communication in Libyan organisations.

This also supports Leat and El-Kot (2007), who argue that the findings of Hofstede (1980) complement the Islamic work ethics and other Islamic values. In terms of the Libyan case in particular, Hofstede’s findings are in agreement with Twati (2006), who conducted a study about the influence of societal and organisational culture on the adoption of management information systems in the Arab world, of which Libya was one of his case studies. In this study, he found that Libyan culture still has strong power distance, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance than what Hofstede indicated in his IBM findings.

Critiques of Hofstede’s work

As is the case with many studies of culture, Hofstede’s work has various weaknesses. First of all, as Leat and El-Kot (2007) claim, Hofstede generalised his results in some cases, such as all Arab countries. Moreover, Hofstede considered the attitudes of his samples as the main elements in judging their cultures. However, many cultures have a diverse and wide range of cultural groups, including dominant and subordinate social groups, as is the case in many of the countries where the study was conducted (Mead, 1998).

Moreover, Hofstede studied only one industry; the computer industry, and the single multinational company IBM. In many of the countries examined, the values of
IBM employees typically represent only a small group, who are educated, middle class and live in cities (Mead, 1998). Furthermore, the study of Hofstede faced various technical problems in terms of the changing attitudes of the participants. For instance, in large power distance cultures, powerful people may pretend to be less powerful than they are. In addition, in masculine cultures men are supposed to be assertive, ambitious, and tough, but they appeared to be more understanding and accepting of the role of women in the organisations (Hofstede, 1997).

Another criticism of Hofstede’s framework is oversimplifying both concepts of individualism and collectivism (Schepers, 2006). Finally, in terms of historical development, Hofstede (2001) considers that cultural change over time is an essential element which might invalidate scores on the indexes in the national cultural context.

**Libyan culture and communication in organisations**

Libyan culture is considered to be a traditional culture, and Libyan society consists of large tribes and families which might be due to the strong influence of the religion of Islam. According to Hall (1969) Libyan culture is considered a contact culture, where people from the same sex can stand and walk side by side near each other. However, in communication between different genders it seems to be a strict culture. Therefore, in terms of communication between individuals in organisations, there are some issues that should be considered in communication behaviours. For example, eye contact and the use of personal space are very sensitive issues, and easily cause embarrassment in Libyan culture, especially between males and females (Samovar and Porter, 2004). In Islamic culture you are not allowed to close your office door when talking to a colleague of the opposite sex. We can argue that in this
culture many cultural values are based on religion, leading to gender differences in communication, behaviour and social structure (Hofstede, 2003).

Muslims believe that God (Allah) is the greatest being and that He created them and arranged all their life affairs. Moreover, Muslims believe that the future is best left to God. Therefore, in doing their businesses, Muslims believe that they have to do their best and then success or failure is arranged by God (Akbar, 2003). This leads Leat and El-Kot (2007) to argue that individuals in Arabic culture consider hard work and keeping themselves busy as part of worshipping God and a way to relinquish sins, which is understood by Hofstede as part of uncertainty avoidance.

This can also be noted in verbal communication. According to Jandt (2004), in Arabic culture the religious expression “inshallah” means “if God wishes”. This phrase is very common and is used informally. Therefore, one should not think that you will be ignored if you ask someone to do something and he says “inshallah”, especially when he says it twice, which means “yes” in Libyan culture.

In communication in the place of work social relations are as important as outside to overcome difficulties (Leant and El Kot, 2007). We can then assume that religious ideas and ethical principles such as “respect others to gain their respect” have a serious influence on the communication behaviour of individuals in Libyan society and organisations. Moreover, in the social atmosphere, harmony and maintaining relationships are the main characteristics of Arabic culture (Jackson, 2002). Therefore, as we will see later in more detail, cooperation for many individuals in this culture is a vital element in coexisting with others in society and in organisations (Hanky, 2004).
Cultural values and organisational hierarchy

Nydell (1996) argues that, in Libya as in other Arab countries, organisations have faced various pressures from the developed countries which have affected cultural values and how people behave in their workplace. In particular, the use of Western technologies and approaches to work has necessitated the adoption of Western values and social practices. As Leat and El-Kot (2007) argue, this leads organisations in Arab countries to develop their strategies and policies according to international standards.

In terms of communication behaviour, people in high power distance cultures do care about face work strategies when they express themselves and clarify their attitudes (Westwood et al., 1992). Therefore, in relation to facial expressions, in such cultures face work communication strategies will be adopted according to the nature of the message. For instance, in delivering a negative message the sender uses an indirect communication style whereas direct face work strategies are used in delivering positive messages (Merkin, 2006).

In verbal communication in high context culture, as with Libyan culture, people usually use fewer words in delivering messages, which is the opposite in low context culture such as in America (Hofstede, 1997). Moreover, in Libyan society, as large power distance cultures, formal and respectful behaviours are important in the organisational hierarchy to show differences between the leaders and other members. For instance, members of staff usually use formal titles when they communicate with their leaders, such as Mr, Dr, Sir, and Madam (Hofstede, 2001). This may be due to social tradition which encourages respect and obedience to parents and elderly people (Abouhidba, 2005). Therefore, an understanding of the national culture has a serious
influence on how managers and employees communicate to make decisions and interpret their roles (Hanky, 2004).

In large power distance cultures, showing respect and obedience are very common among individuals. This may be because they do not value their own participation in decision making. Moreover, the leaders are more likely to have a central role in the decision making processes (Lee, 2005). Individuals accept unequal distribution of power in organisations and in society. This may lead to the use of powerful and formal language in organisational communication (Hofstede, 1997).

Therefore, Peters (2007) argued that participation in the setting of goals and the decision making process are strongly dependent on communication and the relationship between employees and their leaders. Moreover, considering the cultural background of staff and taking their ideas seriously leads to successful communication and a creative environment in the workplace. However, due to cultural characteristics, managers in Libya consider accepting advice, opinions or feedback from their subordinates as a negative sign to their way of running organisations. Therefore, in this society prohibited the feedback of qualified subordinates to advise or update their superiors (Twati & Gammack, 2007). Consequently, this leads to central management and a central decision making process in Libyan organisations.

**Cultural values and harmony in organisations**

As is the case in many studies, Gabb (2006) also concluded that the cultural paradigm places people in the context of their cultural origins, which includes social, historical, psychological, political, knowledge, experience and other social factors. She argued that individuals in collectivist cultures tend to be more concerned about the importance of being members of a cohesive group. This may be to protect
themselves socially in their peer groups in return for their loyalty and conformist social behaviour. On the other hand, this assumption is not encouraged by an individualistic culture that rewards individuals for their initiative and the risks they take to emphasise authority and express their theories and opinions (Hofstede, 2003). Therefore, in Libyan culture, as is the case in collectivist culture, it is really difficult for the staff to work according to organisational culture without being influenced by their cultural background. In other words, friendship and other social relationships have an influence on fulfilling tasks in Libyan organisations.

According to the religion of Islam, women are granted the ability to gain an education and to work. However, for political and social reasons, in the Islamic world and in Arab countries in particular, women still have limited participation in leading public and private organisations (Donno and Russett, 2004). Thus, gender does have an influence on the communication behaviour of individuals in different social settings (Merkin, 2005).

Johnson, et al. (2005) agreed with Burleson (2003), who found that women in employment were more concerned with establishing and maintaining good relationships and improving the work relationship with their leaders. However, men usually do extra work in developing and maintaining their work relationships.

This leads to the argument that the religion of Islam has played an essential role in creating the cultural values of individuals in Libyan society. In Islamic culture, faith, ethics and social practices are strongly connected. Thus, Muslims usually consider Islam as their way of life (Abouhidba, 2005). Therefore, Dabbous-Sensenig (2006) reported that different aspects of the religion of Islam indicate how women should behave and dress within their homes and in the workplace. This social
structure and cultural background affects the relationship and communication within Libyan universities in terms of treatment towards one another and performance.

In general, the application of religion to social relations has a crucial role in increasing power distance, collectivism and masculinity in Libyan culture (Twati, 2006). For instance, obedience to parents and elderly people is strongly recommended in the Koran, being considered as part of worshipping God, whereby believers will be rewarded (Abouhidba, 2005). This leads to a direct relationship between the organisational hierarchy and societal culture in Libyan organisations (Twati & Gammack, 2007). Moreover, it is widely known that conforming behaviours and cooperation are strongly related to collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). This can also be seen in Libyan organisations, where managers care about their subordinates in different emotional and psychological situations (Twati & Gammack, 2004). These cultural dimensions strongly affect the communicating behaviour of individuals in Libyan organisations, in addition to the social and organisational hierarchy structure in Libyan society.

**Conclusion**

From the review of these cultural studies, it can be seen that Libyan culture is characterised by high power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. It also shows low individualism. In this review, most of the studies cited have considered Arabic culture as a single culture; this may be because the Arab world shares certain common characteristics such as language, religion, and other social features. In future research, the concept of Arabic culture should not be generalised to the entire Arab world, for several reasons. In the first place Arab countries are located on two different continents and have different political systems. Moreover, throughout
history, Arab countries have been occupied by various nations with different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, there is a necessity for more empirical studies to investigate cultural issues in the Libyan context. Research in the future should examine to what extent organisational strategies aim to achieve compromises between organisational values and national cultural values in order to encourage organisational change in terms of communication in ruling organisations. This will not only help in assessing communication among individuals in organisations, but can also help management processes and performance. This could then guide Libya towards a better future.

References


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