

Book Review

Cross-cultural analysis: The Science and Art of Comparing the World's Modern Societies and Their Cultures

Minkov, M. (2013)

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Culture is an important concept that has been considered in many social science researches, either in terms of anthropological objectives or other aspects. It is crucial to consider cross-cultural characteristics and elements between modern societies due to theory of convergence. In particular, various circumstances such as technological improvement, travel and tourism, growing immigration and cross-cultural marriages have led to increased commonality in the world's culture.

The author, Michael Minkov, has acquired and nurtured a substantial interest in languages and cultures due to living, studying, and working in many countries. He became interested in cross-cultural anthropology, focusing on national differences in the 1990s. Minkov is an academic disciple and associate of Greet Hofstede, following his paradigm of analysing large databases for the purpose of discovering cultural dimensions and other patterns. Some of Minkov's findings have been accepted by Hofstede as an enrichment and update of his classic model. In his recent book, cross-cultural analysis, Minkov argues the concept of culture and its main characteristics and elements in Part I. In Part II, the study of culture and various kinds of data collection and data analysis techniques in multidimensional circumstances are considered. Subsequently, major cross-cultural studies between 1980 and 2012, and also cultural differences among distinct countries across the globe are examined in Part III and Part IV respectively.

The concept of culture and its definitional significance in cross-cultural studies is emphasised. In addition, the author examines the variables that explain differences among groups of people. In this regard, "external variables with respect to culture – also known as 'exogenous' or 'extraneous' are climate, geographical location, and pathogen prevalence" (p. 12). The concepts of culture are classified in various categories which denote diverse perspectives. Subjective culture and objective culture are invisible perceptions that reside inside and outside people's mind respectively. Other categories in the concept of culture focus on subjects relating to behaviours, different perspectives of the meaning of culture in societies, and culture as an independent phenomenon in the anthropological studies.

Regarding the main characteristics of culture, 'sharedness' refers to the part of culture that is shared by the most members of cultural community. The concept of 'sharedness' refers to the cultural affinity in a society accepted by most people, though not necessarily by specific individuals. In this context, approval and disapproval ideas in cross-cultural studies are examined.

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The second characteristic that is also related to the first concept of sharedness is 'normalcy'. Normalcy concerns cultural traits and perspectives in dynamic societies. The concept focuses on factors that determine whether certain conducts are considered normal or deviant behaviours over time. The definition of normal or abnormal traits should be studied separately in each society, as what constitutes normal or abnormal varies according to culture. The next attributes in culture are rationality and functionality which assign specific value to social behaviours especially in terms of whether a behaviour is meaningful. Again, what constitutes rationale or functional behaviour varies between cultures. A trait that is acceptable in one culture may be criticised in another culture. This difference in perception is the result of various factors, many of which are related to the culture of the society. Other aspects in culture such as transmit ability, diffuseness, complexity, uncontrollability, and predictability, complexity are also controversial. Although Minkov used nations as units of cross-cultural studies, in countries with various ethnic groups, traditions and historical experiences (such as Malaysia), what constitutes normal behaviours in such countries should be considered with care.

In chapter 3, practical perspectives of culture are argued. Special historical or religious occasions or taboos in societies are indicative of certain elements of culture. Universal elements of culture that can be measured in most countries or according to Minkov "at least across modern societies" (p.40) are presented by different factors. In this regard, self-reports can be used as a tool of data collection. Self-reports are reflections of people's attitude of themselves in a society and indicating important elements of cultural and social behaviour such as values, ideologies, beliefs, behavioural intention, and even traits that children should learn. However, the author did not explore the modern subjects such as potential cross-cultural differences in behavioural receptiveness towards new technologies. This is arguably a gap in the book. The next element is the perception of people about the others. It is important to study the two elements of self-reports and reports of impression of others accurately, bearing in mind that some respondents may deliberately provide misleading accounts of their views. Therefore, it is crucial to consider cultural phenomena correctly.

Studying culture and methodologies to collect and test data are covered in Part II. For the methodological approach in cross-cultural studies, Minkov asserted that purely qualitative studies are unreliable due to lack of quantification and mathematical substantiation of hypotheses. To collect data in a large-scale cross-cultural projects, questionnaires that are also called 'paper-and-pencil studies' (p.66) have shown acceptable reliability. As regards data analysis, only analyses that apply to the study of individuals in cross-cultural psychology or cross-cultural management are examined. Minkov did not consider statistical and mathematical approach that researchers can use to constructs model.

Part III focuses on dominant cross-cultural studies while Part IV outlines the main outcomes of the studies considered in earlier parts. The majority of prior researches indicate that dimensions of national culture are remarkably correlated with national wealth. Therefore this chapter focus on level of economic development and cultural differences across different categories of countries.

In conclusion, Minkov's work is a good handbook for students and researchers that provides comprehensive information on the concept of culture. It is also useful data for researchers in social sciences and anthropological studies. Examining previous research from new perspectives, particularly in the categorization of countries for the purpose of studying cultural differences is another strong point of this book. Similar approach can be used in a cross-cultural study.