A critical discussion of Hofstede's concept of Power Distance[1]

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to critically describe and discuss the concept of power distance developed by Hofstede. It is divided into two parts: the first one focuses on the definition and discusses its extent and its implications. It also examines the questions used by Hofstede to calculate this dimension and shows that the formulation of the questions is culturally biased. The second part gives an overview of some methodological weaknesses: the number of questions is too small; some questionnaires were provided in English in non-English speaking countries; Hofstede is only considering studies confirming his theory, at the expense of consistency in national comparisons. Last, the source for the PDI for China remains a mystery.

1 Introduction

Geert Hofstede's work has emphasised the existence and the importance of cultural differences across national borders and his paradigm has become an integral part of intercultural communication studies. His work is based on the results of an international survey conducted in the large multinational corporation IBM between 1967 and 1973. The company's international employee attitude survey program focused on employees' values across nations (G. Hofstede 2001) and collected over 116000 answers from 72 countries. These values reflect a given national culture, defined as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001:9). From the results he obtained, Hofstede has identified the four following dimensions that compose a national culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity. Each country that participated to the survey was attributed a score for each dimension.

The scale, the novelty and the international influence of this study have been praised and many researchers have relied on and approved of Hofstede's model (see for instance the GLOBE project by House et al. 2004 and the analysis of studies using Hofstede's model in Kirkman/Lowe/Gibson 2006). However, some aspects of his work have been strongly criticised such as his research methodology (McSweeney 2002) and the definition of culture he proposes (Fang 2006, 2012; McSweeney 2002). Moreover, the foundations of the fifth cultural dimension, also known as the Confucian dynamism, has also been questioned (Fang 2003).

Hofstede's work is one of the most cited in the field of social sciences (Cardon 2008) but also outside academia (Piller 2011). The concept of power distance is quite popular in explaining cultural differences and the scores seem to be intuitively accepted and understood.

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In my doctoral project, I use the concept of power distance and look more precisely at the way speakers express power distance in interactions. My hypothesis is that linguistic strategies such as speech modification, use of pronouns and honorifics, turn taking in conversation, among other things, can be a way to express power distance appropriately. I focus on the Chinese, the French and the Norwegian cultures. Since the concept of power distance is central in my project, it seems important to provide a definition and a critical discussion of the concept.

The aim of this paper is therefore to define and analyse the concept of power distance, introduced by Hofstede in the first edition of *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related values* (1980) and to discuss it. One may wonder: What is power distance? What does the concept embrace and how has this dimension been created? This paper is composed of two parts. In the first part, I review the definition of power distance and discuss the content of the concept; in the second part, I examine the methodology Hofstede has used to create this dimension and I underline the methodological weaknesses.

2 The concept of Power distance
In this part, I start by defining the concept and by describing how, according to Hofstede, the definition can apply to all aspects of society in a given culture. Then, I give an account of the questions Hofstede used for the calculation of the index and give a closer look at the formulation of the questions.

2.1 Definitions of Power distance and their implications
2.1.1 Definitions of Power distance
The definition of power distance can be found in Hofstede's major works, *Culture's Consequences* (1980, 2001), where he defines the concept as follows (hereafter referred to as the first definition):

> The power distance between a boss B and a subordinate S in a hierarchy is the difference between the extent to which B can determine the behaviour of S and the extent to which S can determine the behavior of B… *The power distance, thus defined, that is accepted by both B and S and supported by their social environment is to be determined by their national culture.* (Hofstede 2001: 83).

Hofstede (2001: 83) explains that his definition is informed by the Dutch social psychologist Mulder, who defines the concept as

> the degree of inequality in power between a less powerful individual (I) and a more powerful Other (O), in which I and O belong to the same (loosely or tight knit) social system. (Mulder 1977: 90).

Hofstede's definition is very similar to Mulder's, as they both relate inequality to a power relation.

In another book (Hofstede G. /Hofstede G.J. /Minkov 2010), G. Hofstede explains that national cultures have either a small power distance index (hereafter PDI) or a large PDI. Malaysia scores 104 on the PDI and has therefore a large PDI; Denmark, on the other hand, scores 18 and has thus a small PDI. Further, he adds that

> [i]n the large power distance situation, superiors and subordinates consider each other as existentially unequal; the hierarchical system is based on this existential inequality […] [while in] the small power distance situation, subordinates and superiors consider each other as existentially equal; the hierarchical system is just an equality of roles, established for convenience, and roles may be changed, so that someone who today is my subordinate may tomorrow be my boss. (*op.cit.*: 73-74).

However, some pages after the first definition and within the same chapter (Hofstede 1980, 2001), he gives another definition of the concept (hereafter referred to as the second definition):
The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally**. (**Hofstede 2001: 98).

This definition appears also in *Cultures and Organizations* (Hofstede et al. 2010: 61), on Geert Hofstede's website (http://geert-hofstede.com/) and seems to be the one that is the most frequently used on the internet.

One may wonder why Hofstede provides two definitions of the same concept. Is this second definition shorter or easier to understand? Clearly, it is not shorter. On the other hand, it is possible that Hofstede wishes to simplify the definition provided in *Culture's Consequences* (1980, 2001). As a matter of fact, in the preface to the second edition to *Culture's Consequences*, he explains that while the latter is a "scholarly book, written for scientists, using scientific language", *Culture and Organizations,* first published in 1991, "is more reader-friendly" (Hofstede 2001: xvii).

2.1.2 Implications
2.1.2.1 from work to all aspects of society
To what extent does this simplified definition affect the extent and the meaning of power distance? The first definition uses terms referring to the work environment such as "boss" and "subordinate" while this terminology is absent in the second one. The first definition also emphasises the fact that both the behaviour of B and S can be determined respectively by S and B, while the second only stresses the perspective of S, now renamed "the less powerful members". In addition, it seems that the second definition applies to all types of institutions while the first one is limited to the work environment. Last, it seems that the second definition is less deterministic as Hofstede talks about the expectations and the acceptance of a type of relationship, whereas he emphasises the determination of the behaviour of both B and S in the first one. To sum up, the work connotation and the deterministic relationship disappears from the second definition, making it more general and therefore more applicable to most aspects of life in society.

This is exactly what Hofstede does in both versions of *Culture's Consequences* and in *Cultures and Organizations*. For instance, the titles of some paragraphs in *Cultures and Organizations* show that Hofstede applies the framework of power distance to many aspects of society: "power distance at school", "power distance and health care", power distance in the workplace", "power distance and the State", "power distance and ideas" (Hofstede et al. 2010).

Thus, one may wonder whether Hofstede considers that the organisational culture at IBM can reflect a national culture in its entirety and whether Hofstede holds an essentialist approach to national culture. These points are discussed below.

2.1.2.2. Are IBM employees representative of the population of a nation that is considered as homogeneous?
This first issue relates to the fact that Hofstede draws conclusions that apply to a homogeneous national culture in its entirety, while the persons surveyed originally were all from the same company, with the same set of occupations and with the same background. Indeed, Hofstede explains that he uses data from "IBM's marketing-plus-service organization

only, as this is the sole part of the company that operated in all countries where the company existed"(Hofstede 2001: 43). He further states that the IBM sales and service people have the same educational background: they all had completed secondary or higher education and could be "considered largely middle class" (Hofstede et al. 2010: 64).

2.1.2.3. Do IBM employees have the same values as all employees?

Within a same country, what does an employee working at IBM have in common with a nurse or a policeman for instance? While dismissing empirical studies that contradict his findings, Hofstede argues that comparisons across cultures should take place among people with the same set of occupations (Hofstede et al 2010: 64). Yet, within a same country, the author of *Culture's Consequence*s generalises the values held by IBM employees to all organisational cultures. Søndergaard, who defends Hofstede's framework, agrees that societies have subcultures (professional, educational…) and that it does not make much sense to compare for instance English nurses to Danish policemen (Søndergaard 2002). Still, does it make sense to compare French bakers to French engineers? It seems difficult to agree as they have different corporate structures, different types of jobs, different educational and probably socio-economic backgrounds and must then hold different values. Therefore, it seems difficult to apply Hofstede's results to all employees in all types of occupations within a same country.

2.1.2.4. Do IBM employees have the same values as the rest of the population?

According to McSweeney, there is no valid reason for assuming that the IBM responses reflected 'the' national average. First, because IBM is not a 'typical' national company and second because the employees most likely diverged from the general population as "working for a high-technology business would have been quite unusual in Third World Nations" (McSweeney 2002: 101). Hofstede generalises his results not only to all types of workers in a country but also to all the people sharing the same nationality. But how can the results of this sample reflect the power distance of a whole nation? As Piller wonders:

> [w]hat do, say, male, middle-class, educated, professional city dwellers in a country have in common with illiterate, female, landless country dwellers in the same country? The only answer is 'nothing much'. (Piller 2011:80).

It seems therefore difficult to claim that the result of this survey can reflect a whole national culture.

2.1.2.5. Do countries have a homogeneous culture?

Furthermore, Hofstede claims that every country shares a unique culture. This point has been strongly criticised by McSweeney, who illustrates his point with the example of Great Britain, which is composed of at least three nations but that is treated as a single entity with a single national culture (McSweeney 2002). Besides, a study (Kwon 2012) that replicates Hofstede's survey in China shows that the cultural dimensions indexes are different within the same country depending on the geographical context. Kwon shows for instance that the PDI for Shenzhen, in the south of China is 40 while PDI for Taiyuan, in the north, is 49. This study indicates that latitude plays an important role in assessing culture and proves therefore that it is difficult to claim that a national culture is homogeneous over a whole national territory.

2.1.2.6. Can values at work apply to all aspects of life in society?

As it has been mentioned earlier, Hofstede generalises the second definition to most aspects of life in society. He extends the validity and the applicability of the IBM survey to all categories of workers, within a nation and in all social contexts. He argues that "people do not carry separate mental programs for work and non-work situations" and that "dominant work values in a society have their roots in the family and at school, and they are also reflected in political systems and in dominant ideas, philosophies, and theories" (Hofstede 2001: 92). In that case, an individual holds the same cultural values and behaves in the same way in all social contexts. This statement is valid only if, as Hofstede, one holds an essentialist point of view where the individual remains the same in any circumstances. I discuss this issue below.

2.1.3 An essentialist point of view on culture

2.1.3.1 Essentialism

In a recent article that deals with the evolution of Hofstede's theory since 1980, Minkov and Hofstede explain that

> national cultures are part of the mental software we acquire during the first ten years of our lives in the family, the living environment and at school, and they contain most of our basic values (Minkov/ Hofstede 2011: 14).

According to Hofstede, culture is therefore programmed as a "software" in the early child-hood. As a child, we are told what is an appropriate behaviour: we learn whether "it was good or bad to ask questions, to speak up, to fight, to cry, to work hard, to lie, to be impolite" (Hofstede 2010: 11). This set of behaviour and of values, unique in each culture, is formed unconsciously and then transmitted to the next generation, as "parents tend to reproduce the education they received, whether they want to or not" (*ibid.*). The software is so powerful that it does not change while growing up and it remains stable over time since it is transmitted from generation to generation. In Hofstede's point of view, a national culture is therefore determined in advance and cannot be changed by the individual. In other words, he holds an essentialist view on culture.

Essentialism, as a philosophical concept, is defined by Holliday (2011: 4) as follows:

> essentialism presents people's individual behaviour as entirely defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are.

Further, in an article explaining the origins of essentialism, Barrett (2001) explains the concept as: "to be essentialist is to treat objects as if they 'have essences or underlying natures that make them the thing that they are' (Medin 1989 cited in Barret 2001: 3)), and to treat them as if they have properties that result from these essences" (ibid.). For Hofstede, an individual is born and raised with a certain national culture that remains rather stable over time and in all circumstances. As a result, it is possible to describe a national culture − Norway − and to refer to its inhabitants as 'the Norwegians' as all Norwegians share the same cultural values.

2.1.3.2 Criticisms

This position has been widely criticised in the field of intercultural communication (Fang 2012; Holliday 2011; McSweeney 2002; Piller 2011). Fang for instance, questions Hofstede's conception of national culture in which each national culture is "reduced into and

isolated from each other in terms of discrete "onions" politically defined and artificially created *nation-states*" (Fang 2006: 74). This conception is the "product of the Cold war era during which national cultures were like "black boxes"(self-contained, tangible and rigid onions)" (*op. cit:* 84). However, in today's global cross-cultural management environment, "national cultures are not rigid 'black boxes' any longer but are becoming increasingly transparent, fluid, elastic, virtual and noble" (*ibid.*). One study (Gooderham and Nordhaug 2003) illustrates this point and shows that in contemporary European work-values, gender is a more powerful parameter for predicting work-related cultural differences. The study, based on an attitude survey questionnaire of business school students reveals a number of important differences between male and female students within a same nationality. The authors have found for instance that Italian and Swedish female students, in this context, had more in common than respectively Italian and Swedish male students. It seems therefore difficult to talk about a national essence that would be common to both men and women of a given country. Furthermore, Fang argues that cultural values change depending on the time, the situation and the context (Fang 2012) and suggests a new paradigm to study national cultures based on the Yin Yang symbol. Originally from the ancient Chinese philosophy, the symbol can be described as a circle divided into two equal halves by a curvy line, one side of which is black (Yin) and the other white (Yang). The white dot in the black area and the black dot in the white area connote coexistence and unity of the opposites to form the whole (Fang 2012: 7). According to Fang, Yin Yang suggests that human beings, organizations and cultures intrinsically embrace paradoxes for their sheer existence and healthy development. Culture is

> "both/and" instead of "either/or". We are both Yin and Yang, feminine and masculine, long term and short-term, individualistic and collectivistic, monochromic and polychromic, and high-context and low-context, depending on situations, context and time. (Fang 2006: 77).

Furthermore, regarding the evolution of cultural values in a national culture in comparison with another one, Hofstede suggests that "cultures do evolve but they tend to move together in more or less one and the same cultural direction" (Minkov/Hofstede 2011: 13). To correlate the theory, a study conducted by Inglehart (2008) is mentioned. The latter examines empirical data from Western European countries spanning the period from 1970 to 2006 and concludes that countries from the Western part of Europe have not changed that much during this period. But one could easily argue that this region has remained quite stable during the studied period: political institutions were roughly already in place and there has not been any internal war. How about countries that have undergone many important political, cultural or economic changes such as China?

Last, one may wonder: Does a person remain the same and have the same behaviour at home, with friends or at work? It is disputable. Unlike Hofstede, Goffman (1959) argues that individuals wear different masks depending on the context they are in. He pictures society as a theatre where everything is a performance. Individuals wear masks; they adapt themselves to other persons and situations. The subject is not stable anymore, but 'liquid'.

To sum up, Hofstede proposes a definition of power distance that embraces all aspects of social life that is valid only if one holds an essentialist point of view. This has been criticised by many researchers who argue that the expression of cultural values in general, and power distance by implication, depends on the time, the situation and the context.

I believe that the individual is not entirely 'liquid' and that he or she holds cultural values that are transmitted from generation to generation. In that sense, I somehow agree with Hofstede's position. However, unlike Hofstede, I think that one's values can be changed, influenced by the contact with other cultures or by one's personal history. Besides, I agree with Goffman's idea of individuals wearing masks depending on the situation, the person and the context. This is, in my opinion, very visible in business negotiation where, in addition to cultural differences, one will act differently depending on his or her status in a company and in the negotiating situation (being the buyer or the seller).

2.2 The formulation of the questions

In the following, I first present the questions that Hofstede has used to elaborate the PDI and then discuss whether the formulation of the central question is culturally biased.

2.2.1 The questions

The method to calculate the power distance index is provided in details in the two versions of *Culture's Consequences* (1980; 2001). The survey is composed of four types of questions: the *satisfaction* questions deal with the personal evaluation of an aspect of the work situation; the *perception* questions give a subjective description of an aspect or problem of the work situation; the *personal goals and beliefs* questions are related to an ideal job and the questions about the *demographics* relate to the age of the employee, the gender and the years spent in the company (Hofstede 2001: 48). The survey is presented as a multiple choice questionnaire, and depending on the question, four or five choices are given. The questions are preceded by a letter (A, B or C). A closer look at Appendix 1 shows that the letter does not refer to a specific thematic but indicates when and in which version these questions were used.

The third chapter of *Culture's Consequences* (2001) is dedicated to the power distance concept. In this chapter, Hofstede explains that the calculation of the index is based on the mean percentage values of three questions: B46, A54 and A55. They are formulated as follows:

How frequently, in your experience, do the following problems occur?
B46: Employees being afraid to express disagreement with their managers:
1. Very frequently
2. Frequently
3. Sometimes
4. Seldom
5. Very seldom

The descriptions below apply to four different types of managers. First, please read through these descriptions:

Manager 1: Usually makes his/her decisions promptly and communicates them to his/her subordinates clearly and firmly. Expects them to carry out the decisions loyally and without raising difficulties.

Manager 2: Usually makes his/her decisions promptly, but before going ahead, tries to explain them fully to his/her subordinates. Gives them the reasons for the decisions and answers whatever questions they may have.

Manager 3: Usually consults with his/her subordinates before he/she reaches his/her decisions. Listens to their advice, considers it, and then announces his/her decision. He/she then expects all to work loyally to implement it whether or not it is in accordance with the advice they gave.

Manager 4 (version 1967-69): Usually calls a meeting of his/her subordinates when there is an important decision to be made. Puts the problem before the group and invites discussion. Accepts the majority viewpoint as a decision.

Manager 4 (version 1970-1973): Usually calls a meeting of his/her subordinates when there is an important decision to be made. Puts the problem before the group and tries to obtain consensus. If he/she obtains consensus, he/she accepts this as a decision. If consensus is impossible, he/she usually makes the decision him/herself.

A54: Now for the above types of manager, please mark the one which you would prefer to work under:
    1. Manager 1
    2. Manager 2
    3. Manager 3
    4. Manager 4

A55: And, to which one of the above four types of managers would you say your own manager most closely corresponds?
    1. Manager 1
    2. Manager 2
    3. Manager 3
    4. Manager 4
    5. He does not correspond closely to any of them.

The answers obtained from the participants for each country were then integrated into the following formula:

PDI= 135-25 (mean score employee afraid)
+ (percentage perceived manager 1+2)
- (percentage preferred manager 3, 1967-69)

2.2.2 The formulation of the central question for the calculation of the PDI
Regarding the description of Manager 4, Hofstede explains that the description was changed because the actual occurrence of the old type 4 was perceived as very rare, and offering respondents the possibility to choose the "participative" style was seen as desirable for organization development purposes. This change obviously affected the response distribution (Hofstede 2001:85).

While Hofstede justifies the reason for the change in the formulation of manager 4, he also implies that the formulation of the questions can have an influence on the answers provided by the employees. Thus, it seems reasonable to raise the hypothesis that the formulation of some questions may have affected the answers.

In the following, I will concentrate on the formulation of the question B46, which was chosen as the central question for measuring power distance (Hofstede 2001: 53). It is

formulated as follows: "Employees being afraid to express disagreement with their managers".

First, the question does not use the personal pronoun "you". It suggests that the aim of this question is not to ask about the employee's own experience but to consider his or her perception of other employees. In other words, it does not deal with the employee himself but with what he thinks about the behaviour of his/her colleagues and could thus be reformulated as such: "*do you think that* other employees are afraid to express disagreement with their managers?"

Second, the adjective "afraid" is defined as the "feeling fear, or feeling worry about the possible results of a particular consequence" (Cambridge Dictionary Online). The feeling of being afraid is therefore linked to the possible consequences the employees may have (being fired, not being promoted for instance) if they express disagreement.

Third, the question B46 links two clauses that are related with a causal link. The two clauses are (1): employees do (or: do not) express disagreement with their managers and (2) they are afraid of their managers. Both clauses are linked with an implicit causal link and could be rephrased as follows: "employees do not express disagreement with their managers *because* they are afraid". The formulation implies that the only reason why an employee is unwilling to disagree is because he is afraid. All other possible reasons are ignored.

Still, this causal link is arguably biased. In Western cultures, employees may be afraid to speak their minds because they are afraid of being fired or disapproved of. But in other cultures, an employee may decide not to express disagreement out of respect for his manager, to avoid his manager or himself losing face. In the Chinese culture for instance, where hierarchy is linked to respect rather than to power (Dumont 1988; Taylor 1989; Weiming/ Hejtmanek/Wachman 1992), employees may be unwilling to express disagreement out of respect for their bosses. It does not mean that employees in Western cultures do not respect their bosses; respect manifests itself in other ways and is not incompatible with expressing disagreement. In a nutshell, there are many reasons to be unwilling to express disagreement. However, Hofstede takes for granted that "because the employee is afraid" is the only possible explanation why an employee would refrain from expressing disagreement.

As a result, the surveyed IBM employee does not have the choice: if he thinks that other employees do express disagreement "4. seldom" or "5. very seldom", it must be because they are afraid. Answering this question with the choice 4 or 5 implies a feeling that may not be endorsed by all persons surveyed and the interpretation of the result of this question would therefore be biased.

It could have been more judicious to phrase the question into two parts and leave a blank line for the employee to express the reason of his behaviour. These questions could have been formulated as follows:

(1) Do you express your disagreement with your manager?
    a. Very frequently
    b. Frequently
    c. Sometimes
    d. Seldom
    e. Very seldom

f.   Never

(2) If seldom, very seldom, or never: what are the reasons?

3 Methodological Issues
In this part, I raise the following methodological issues in Hofstede's calculation of power distance: the number of questions used for the calculation of the index; the translation of the questionnaire; the fact that Hofstede is only looking at data that confirm his theory; the fact that he compares subjects that are not comparable and the absence of data for China.

3.1 The number of questions to calculate PDI
Hofstede explains that the IBM survey is composed of 60 'core' questions. The number of questions and their formulations may have varied from a version to another, depending on the time when these surveys were administrated. In addition, Hofstede has been careful not to include the results provided by managers for the calculation of the power distance index. As he explains for the question B46 about the employee being afraid to express disagreement with their managers, "the question works well only for *nonmanagers*". Answers from managers had to be excluded, as managers' perceptions of employees' fear to disagree (with them!) are not equivalent to employees' perceptions" (Hofstede 2001: 85).

It is striking that out of 60 core questions of the survey only three questions were used to determine the power distance index: B46, A54 and A55 (see the detailed formulation of these questions above). Hofstede adds that the country scores were then correlated with six other conceptually related questions: A48, A52, A54, A55, B55, B56 (Hofstede 2001: 41). These questions are formulated as follows (A54 and A55 are described above):

A48: If an employee did take a complaint to higher management, do you think he would suffer later on for doing this (such as getting a smaller salary increase, or getting a less desirable job in the department, etc.)?

A52: How often would you say your immediate manager is concerned about helping you getting ahead?

B55: To what extent do you agree with this statement: Employees lose respect for a manager who asks them for their advice before he makes a final decision?

B56: To what extent do you agree with this statement: employees in industry should participate more in the decisions made by management?

To start with, except from the questions A54 and A55, the correlated questions are not taken into consideration in the calculation of PDI. Furthermore, a closer look at the questionnaire shows that other items could have been used for the calculation of power distance, such as:

A11: How important is it to you to get the recognition you deserve when you do a good job?

A13: How important is it to you to have considerable freedom to adopt your own approach to the job?

A16: How important is it to you to have a good working relationship with your manager?

As a matter of fact, the answer to the question A13 for example could have given a very good insight whether the employee is expected to take his own decisions in the work environment or whether he has to be obedient to his boss, even when he deals with his own approach to the job.

As a result, it is argued that the number of questions used to calculate the PDI is quite limited and that the study could have gained in reliability if more questions had been included. This is all the more relevant as the analysis of the formulation of the central question (B46) is biased. One may wonder why Hofstede did not use more questions to calculate the PDI, especially as they already were formulated in the survey. Besides, none of these questions mentioned above are used to calculate any of the remaining cultural dimensions.

3.2 The translation of the questionnaires

Hofstede has made a remarkable work with providing translations to his questionnaire. In most of these countries, it was translated into the national language of the country (see Exhibit 2.1 in Hofstede 2001:44 for a detailed account of the translations). Still, the table shows that the questionnaire was provided in English in many African countries surveyed (Zambia, Kenya, Ghana…) and in most of the East Asian countries (Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia). The fact that these surveys were not in the national language of the country can have played an important role in the understanding and the interpretation of the questions by people whose native language is very different from English. Consequently, the results provided for these countries may be open to discussion.

It may be argued that IBM employees from former British colonies (Hong Kong and Singapore for instance) had a good command of English. It is indeed very likely that they have learned English at school and that official documents were in English. It is also likely that the working language at IBM at the time of the survey may have been English in some of these countries and that most of the employees had a good command of the language. Still, one cannot expect full fluency from the 88 employees surveyed in Hong Kong nor the 58 employees from Singapore. The problem of fluency is even more relevant in Taiwan for instance, where Mandarin Chinese was and still is the only official language of the country and one can expect that the hypothesis raised above may apply.

3.3 Confirmations of Hofstede's power distance concept

The second edition of *Culture's Consequences* (2001) includes the reviews of many studies that validate Hofstede's results. In the chapter dedicated to power distance, a part entitled "Validating PDI against data from other sources" gives a detailed account of studies that correlate with Hofstede's results. These studies include straight replications of the IBM study on other occupations (IMEDE participants and commercial airline pilots) and more general studies that deal with general values in society. Elsewhere, other confirmation study mentioned by Hofstede is the GLOBE project that correlated positively with Hofstede's results (House et al. 2004; Minkov/Hofstede 2011). The results of these studies always seem to overlap with Hofstede's results and therefore confirm his theory.

In this perspective, one study is particularly interesting for my research project as it deals with cultural relativism and the Chinese perspective on culture. The study, initiated by Michael Harris Bond in 1981, questions Hofstede's etic approach, i.e. the fact that Hofstede studied cultures he did not belong to and tried to apply universal categories to these cultures. Bond and his research team (the Chinese Culture Connection) on the other hand, wanted to describe the Chinese culture from an emic perspective, i.e from within the Chinese culture. They have thus worked on a value project entitled the Chinese Value Survey (hereafter CVS) which would take the Chinese values as a starting point. The CVS aimed at discussing

whether an instrument derived from a different cultural tradition and similarly applied around the world would yield the same or different results from these of Hofstede. (The Chinese Culture Connection 1987: 144).

The method consisted in listing the 40 "fundamental and basic values for Chinese people" (*op.cit.*: 145) that were then presented to university students. These students were asked to indicate on a 9-point scale how important each of the concepts was to them personally. The CVS produced four categories: integration, Confucian work dynamism, human heartedness and moral discipline. Three of these correlated with the IBM dimensions (respectively power distance, collectivism and masculinity) and the last one, called "Confucian work dynamism" was used by Hofstede for the creation of his fifth dimension, the "long term orientation" (Hofstede 2001: 71). The survey was conducted in 22 countries and according to the Chinese Culture Connection, 20 overlapped with those reported by Hofstede.

According to the Chinese Culture Connection, the category called "integration" correlates with Hofstede's power distance dimension. The category is composed of the following values: "Tolerance of other, Harmony with other, Solidarity with others, Non-competitiveness, Trustworthiness, Contentedness, Being conservative, A close and intimate friend, Filial piety, Patriotism, Chastity in women" (The Chinese Culture Connection 1987: 150). Without analysing this category in details, it is surprising that values such as "patriotism" and "chastity in women" are related to Hofstede's power distance dimension. These values seem all the more difficult to apply in a work environment, which was Hofstede's starting point. The value of "Non-competitiveness", in addition, could better fit in the masculinity dimension and the value "ordering relationships" that belong to the Confucian work dynamism could easily fit in CVSI that is correlated with power distance. In addition, the value "Patriotism" is mentioned twice, in two different categories: CVSI and CVSII.

Even though the results seem to correlate with the IBM's study, it is surprising that Hofstede uses surveys that are so different from his initial one to validate his theory. It seems that CVS is just another study that verifies the universalism of Hofstede's theory. This issue indicates that it is easy to see confirmations of a theory everywhere. Popper explains that Marx's theory of history for instance, appears to be able to explain practically everything to those who believed in the theory. As Popper states, "once your eyes were thus opened, you saw confirming instances everywhere: the world was full of verifications of the theory." (Popper 1989: 35). He ends his chapter by one of the following conclusions: "It is easy to obtain confirmations, or verifications, for nearly every theory − if we look for confirmations" (*op.cit.*: 36). On the other hand, studies that do not correlate with IBM's findings and criticisms of the theory are fiercely rejected by Hofstede. Therefore, the fact that Hofstede only sees and accepts studies that confirm his observations represents a methodological weakness.

3.4 Impossible comparisons?

"Comparisons of countries or regions should always be based on people in the same set of occupations. One should not compare Spanish engineers with Swedish secretaries" (Hofstede 2010: 64). Though he theoretically stresses the importance of comparing the same set of occupations, Hofstede tends to ignore this aspect in his quest for confirmation. One example of that is his use of the CVS. As it has been said earlier, this study has largely contributed to the creation of the fifth cultural dimension, but also to the validation of his theory. It is surprising to see that the sample population is IBM employees for Hofstede and university

students for CVS. Besides, the method used is different: Hofstede uses a questionnaire, with questions and multiple choice answers while CVS asks the respondents to evaluate values on a scale. The two studies are thus very different and therefore, it seems difficult to compare two different populations on two different types of surveys. Thus, to what extent can the results provided by studies such as CVS be relevant to validate Hofstede's dimensions? This question is all the more relevant for the calculation of the power distance index in China.

3.5 What PDI for China?
China is not mentioned in the list of countries surveyed by Hofstede provided in *Culture's Consequences* but scores for China suddenly appears in *Cultures and Organizations* and on Hofstede's website. Thus, where does the PDI for China (80) come from?

In *Culture's Consequences* Hofstede explains that "the country culture dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance were found through an eclectic analysis of data, based on theoretical reasoning and correlation analysis" (Hofstede 2001: 41).

For China, Hofstede explains in a footnote that the score for power distance is based on "observation and an extensive literature" (G. Hofstede 2001: 52 footnote to Exhibit A5.3), but does not provide further details.

First, in the edition from 1980, Hofstede regrets the lack of data for mainland China. Still, based on a study from another researcher, he describes "work relationships as quite participative but party relationships as strongly hierarchical" (Hofstede 1980: 128), and therefore estimates a total total Power distance score for China "somewhere in the middle of the scale- not very far from Taiwan and Japan" (*op.cit.*: 129).

Japan scores 54 on the power distance index and Taiwan 58, which is still quite far from the score of 80. It would have been a reasonable assumption to think that the PDI for China would be somewhere around the PDI of Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore. As a matter of fact, the Chinese diaspora is important across South East Asia (Piller 2011) and Chinese people are especially present in the countries mentioned above. But this idea has been rejected by Hofstede himself in 1981, as he explains that the high power distance in Singapore and Hong Kong can be explained by their status as colonies: "The Chinese settle-ments of Singapore and Hong Kong show much higher PDIs, but these are (ex-)colonies" (Hofstede 1980: 128-129). Still, the PDI for Hong Kong (68) and Singapore (74) still remains below the mentioned index for China.

Second, since Bond's study was using China as a starting point, one may wonder if the PDI for China comes from the CVS results. Yet, none of the 22 countries researched by the Chinese Culture Connection is China.

Thus, one may wonder where the actual number for 80 for the Chinese PDI comes from and why is this score so high compared to other East Asian countries that are also influenced by Confucianism? These questions remain unanswered.

4 Conclusion
The aim of the paper has been to describe and to explain the concept of power distance established by Hofstede. The paper was divided into two parts: first a discussion of the concept and second an overview of some methodological weaknesses. The concept has been initially introduced to describe the boss-subordinate relationship in the work environment but

has been extended by Hofstede himself to all aspects of life in society in a given national culture. This perspective is an essentialist one that pictures an individual as being programmed according to a 'software'. To calculate the PDI, Hofstede has used three questions, of which the central one (B46) is formulated in a way that is culturally biased. The second part has shown the methodological issues in the calculation of power distance: the number of questions is too small; some questionnaires were provided in English in non-English speaking countries; Hofstede is only looking at confirmations of his theory, at the expense of consistency in national comparisons. Last, the source for the PDI for China remains a mystery.

This discussion therefore raises several issues: (1) Should the concept of power distance be used at all when working with cultural differences? (2) To what extent does it depict a cultural reality? (3) What other elements should be taken into account when dealing with power distance and cultural differences?

In spite of the issues raised in this discussion, the concept of power distance can still be used when dealing with cultural differences. It is indeed the dimension that is the most immediately visible in the work environment and that can be the most problematic in negotiation situations, as one who fails to notice and acknowledge the hierarchy structure in a high PDI culture could be perceived as impolite and lacking respect. In my doctoral project, the concept remains useful as I am looking at the manifestations of power distance in language. In that sense, I do not aim at explaining other cultures through Hofstede's paradigm but I intent to operationalise the concept from a linguistic point of view. In my project, the indexes for power distance for the three cultures I am studying will be used as a theoretical starting point and empirical studies will allow me to see how participants actually express hierarchy and the related politeness so as to give face to their interlocutors.

Besides, the power distance dimension remains under-researched compared to collectivism/ individualism (Kirkman et al. 2006). In addition, it is paradoxical that while Hofstede used an organisation as a research corpus, studies that deal with both power distance and group/organisation have been clearly under-researched (Kirkman et al. 2006).

As to the extent to which power distance depicts a cultural reality, it should be kept in mind that the concept is culturally biased. It is indeed constructed by Western minds and depicts a Western vision of the world. As Minkov and Hofstede rightly state,

> a construct is a mental idea that reflects objectively existing phenomena. There are many subjective ways of thinking of and describing an objective reality. Constructs are no the reality itself but imaginary models that scholars build in order to organize their impressions of the observed reality in a way that makes sense to them and, hopefully, to others. (Minkov/Hofstede 2011: 17).

In this perspective, power distance can be a useful tool to observe and acknowledge the fact that there is more or less a sense of hierarchy in different cultures. Hofstede's concept has therefore an explanatory force but it is not an instrument to explain the reason why hierarchy exists in each culture (see the discussion on the formulation of the question above).

Last, the concept of national culture should be used with care. As a matter of fact, in a society that is clearly more or more globalised, to what extent can one restrict an individual's culture to the passport he or she holds? Gooderham and Norhaug have pointed out in their study that parameters such as age and gender should be taken into consideration. It could be added that parameters such as the exposure to a specific foreign culture, the experience in

dealing with a given culture and the training one has had are also essential to understand how people behave and react to cultural differences. That is the reason why, in my doctoral project, in addition to the observation of intercultural interactions, I will conduct interviews of the participants to find out to what extent these other parameters have played a role in their interactions.

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