Understanding cultural differences

What are, more precisely, these invisible elements that are perceived as cultural differences? One approach to answering such a question is to use the models developed around the concept of “cultural dimension”. These are just tools helping in making sense of what elements of difference exist. They should not be seen as labels but as continuums. A certain group or society can be located anywhere on this continuum. There are several models of cultural dimensions and the list below is based on a combination of some of these models (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997; Hall, 1989).

1. **Low context / high context** – People used to live in a low-context society expect to receive detailed and explicit communication, to be given clear information and guidelines, while people used with high context environments do not consider important to make explicit a lot of elements in their communication because the other people are expected to share them from past experiences. An institution where rules of behaviour and procedures are clearly defined and decisions are made based on information provided explicitly in documents is an example of a low context environment, while family is an example of a high context environment.

2. **Low / High Power Distance** - the extent to which there is acceptance of an unequal distribution of power in society. High-power distance societies are strictly hierarchical, and the decisions are taken by those in a position of authority. Changes in the hierarchy are usually not welcome and although people may move to a higher position, moving down to an inferior position is considered as problematic. Low-power distance means egalitarian relationships and decisions made by consultation and deliberation. Positions of authority are considered temporary and anyone can take the role of leader at a certain moment and under certain circumstances.

3. **Individualism / collectivism** – From an individualistic perspective people are expected to stand up for themselves and to choose their own affiliations. They are presumed able to make their own decisions and take care of themselves, while bearing the responsibility for the decisions made. A collectivistic view sees individuals predominantly as members of a group to which they belong for life and which provides security and protection but will demand loyalty and compliance with internal norms.

4. **Masculinity / femininity** - refers to the values associated in most societies with gender roles. So called ‘masculine’ cultures value competition, assertiveness, ambition, and the accumulation of wealth and material possessions, whereas feminine cultures place more value on care for others, positive relationships and quality of life. Feminine cultures also consider that there should be little differences between the social roles of men and women.

5. **Uncertainty avoidance** - reflects the extent to which people attempt to cope with anxiety by minimizing uncertainty. High levels of uncertainty avoidance mean favouring structured circumstances and importance is given to rituals and procedures in various areas of social life, from religion, to food, strict planning of activities and belief in the existence of a single and absolute truth. On the contrary, uncertainty acceptance is associated with more tolerance of different opinions, with preference for as few rules as possible, and with a relativist position, allowing for the coexistence of different beliefs and religions, side by side.
6. **Long-term / short-term orientation** - describes a society's "time horizon," or the importance attached to the future versus the past and present. Values associated with long-term orientation are thrift and perseverance while values associated with short-term orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'.

7. **Achievement / ascription** - Is recognition given based on deeds or associated with social status? People with a background in a society where achievement prevails will expect recognition and appreciation based on their performance and individual merits. People with a background in societies based on ascription might expect that recognition and appreciation are a function of social status and not of the individual achievement.

8. **Sequential time / synchronic time** - Do we do things one at a time or several things at once? People belonging to cultural groups with a preference for a sequential approach to time, are used to treating time as a commodity, as something to be saved, spent or wasted. Time is used to bring order and set limits. On the other hand, in cultural groups which tend to see time synchronically, time is seen more holistically and interconnected. Synchronic cultures tend to value priorities more than a predetermined time limit. They will do what is perceived as the right thing to do at the moment, even if that contradicts the initially set schedule.

9. **Internal control / external control** - Do we control our environment or are we controlled by it? People in societies valuing internal control tend to believe they can bend nature and the future to their will. An obstacle to what is desired doesn’t change the goal, only the way to achieve it. People in societies which assume external control seek to live in harmony with the reality as it is, rather than trying to fundamentally change it.