Potential on Using Cultural Syndromes for Explaining Differences in Attitudes in Northern and Southern EU Countries

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, it is more realistic to view the development of a new technology as a result of a complex social system of interactions and decisions. Understanding the public's range of views on biotechnology is important for decision makers, in order to be able to anticipate potential acceptance problems or, one step further, to take consumer or public desires and concerns into account so that desirable applications can be developed.

Previous work from the same research group, using data from Eurobarometer surveys, was trying to explore the attitudes of the European consumers towards genetic modification of food. Emerging differences in attitudes towards genetically modified food have not been explained adequately in most cases using only sociodemographic variables. In addition strong national differences lead to the idea that cultural differences should also be taken into account, despite the difficulties in formulating specific hypotheses that can be tested empirically.

In this paper, in an effort to approach culture in a more clear way, we try to track down and analyse the specific units (customs, traditions, beliefs, and other social norms) that comprise cultures. The notion of cultural syndromes as approached by Triandis is tackled. Furthermore applying data from the European Social Survey (ESS) to Scwhartz's value system, our objective is to validate empirically the potential utilisation of Schwartz values to further explain existing differences in attitudes towards GM food among European countries. Further research can lead to a deeper and more precise understanding of cultural differentiation as well as to a more valid cross-cultural theory of attitude formation.

Key words: attitudes towards genetically modified food, attitude formation, cultural differentiation, cultural syndromes

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Introduction

In a constantly changing socio-political environment reactions to internal and external stimuli vary in a way that is not easily explained. This is perfectly portrayed when trying to engage in some form of comparative research (cross-cultural, cross-national).

The starting point for the present paper steams from previous work conducted from the same research group. Through a paper under the title *Comparing consumer attitudes towards genetically modified food in Europe,* presented at EAAE's Zaragoza conference we have provided a comparative ranking of the EU member countries in relation to the prevalence of rejection of genetically modified food. In addition we have tried to specify the importance of socio-economic and informational determinants of a potential defender of genetically modified food by estimating the partial effects of age, gender, education, income, family status, size of household and knowledge on genetically modified food in an attitude multivariate model. Emerging differences in attitudes towards genetically modified food have not been explained adequately in most cases using only sociodemographic variables. Strong national differences lead to the idea that cultural differences should also be taken into account, despite the difficulties in formulating specific hypotheses that can be tested empirically.

We now try to explore mainly from a theoretical perspective, the potential on using a value oriented approach on cross-cultural comparison in order to give information on cultural value differences between European countries, being relevant for difference in attitudes toward genetically modified food. A thorough analysis for the potential utilisation of Schwartz values is provided, and empirically validated with data from the European Social Survey (ESS). The analysis focuses on 4 European countries (Greece, Germany, Netherlands and Spain) to highlight European differences of Northern and Southern countries of Europe.

2. Theoretical considerations

Defining culture

Culture is not easily defined, nor is there a consensus among scholars, philosophers and politicians as to what exactly the concept should include. Culture is one of the most complicated words in the English language. Although it is being used to deal with important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines, *there are probably as many conceptions of culture as there are researchers in the field* (Spering, 2001).

Culture is derived from the Latin cultura, from the verb colere, with the meaning of tending or cultivation. In Christian authors, cultura replaced the meaning of worship. The Old French form was couture, later replaced by culture. The historical development of the word in many indo-european languages is further adding in complexity when trying to define the term.

One of the simplest and more popular definitions on culture was provided by the anthropologist Melville Herskovits who stated that culture is *the man-made part of the* environment (Herskovits, 1955). Following the same direction psychologist Harry Triandis wrote that *culture is a set of human-made objective and subjective elements that in the past have increased the probability of survival and resulted in satisfactions for the participants in an ecological niche, and thus became shared among those who could communicate with each other because they had a common language and they lived in the same time and place* (Triandis, 1994).

The notion of culture is related directly to expressions of human behaviour. *Culture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the products of human activities as determined by these habits* (Boas, 1930),

or culture *refers to that part of the total setting [of human existence] which includes the material objects of human manufacture, techniques, social orientations, points of view, and sanctioned ends that are the immediate conditioning factors underlying behaviour* (Herskovits, 1948). This way, reactions of individuals may be decided by the cultural context; so culture includes *those historically created selective process which channel men's reactions both to internal and to external stimuli* (Kluckhohn and Kelly, 1945) or *transmitted patterns of values, ideas and other symbolic systems that shape behaviour* (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952) as well as pattern of beliefs and expectations shared by members that produce norms shaping behaviour.

A fundamental characteristic that can be met in a series of definitions is that the specific things that form a culture must be shared. As Triandis points out *culture is a shared pattern of beliefs, attitudes, norms, role perceptions, and values. Thus, the first thing to pay attention to when we study culture is whether or not ideas are shared. The next thing to pay attention to is whether shared responses correspond to a language, a time period and a geographic region. A nation consists of thousands of cultures, but many of these cultures have common elements* (Triandis, 2002). Whether defined in terms of shared customs and rituals (Mead, 1955), shared symbols and meanings (Geertz, 1973), shared values (Schwartz & Bardi, 1997), or shared personality traits (Church, 2000), culture does not exist unless those items are shared among the members of a distinct group of people.

Another basic feature of culture is learning procedure. Defining culture in a broader sense as the sum of learned behaviors, as the accumulated experience which is socially transmitted it is not a great conceptual leap to argue that culture resides in all learned behaviour *and* in some shaping template prior to behaviour as well. As long as learning is an essential characteristic, teaching which is essential for the learning procedure is also very important. The relationship between these two features provides the dynamic character of culture. Culture exists in a constant state of change. Hong and Chiu describe culture as a dynamic open system that spreads across geographical boundaries and evolves trough time (Hong and Chiu, 2001).

Noting the differences in providing an accurate and widely accepted definition of culture, two final quotations will be provided. Aime Cesair, Martiniquen writer, speaking to the World Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris noted *culture is everything; culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we walk, the way we tie our ties -- it is not only the fact of writing books or building houses* (Cesair, 1995). Addressing the complexity of the issue Emerson quoted, *culture ends in headache* (Emerson, 1841).

Why studying values in order to understand cultures?

After World War II there has been a major leap forward in the development of comparative research. Lasswell (1968: 3) points out that the increase in the number of similar studies was due to *the accelerated interdependence of the world area, an interdependence that was chokingly dramatized by World War II, by bipolarized tensions between the communist and the non-communist worlds, and by the anti-colonialist emergence of new nation states in Africa and Asia.* Thus, the modern era of cross-cultural research began with the occurrence of more systematic approaches in sociology, economics and political science especially during the second half of the 20th century in Europe and North America.

A central theme in cross-cultural research has been the focus on values. Values can be conceptualised both at individual and at group level. At individual level, values represent internalised social representations or beliefs that people appeal to as the ultimate rationale for their actions. Thus, values are tied with social life. At the group level, values are scripts or cultural ideals held in common by members of a society or group.

Thus, studying values or the value priorities of a society has at least two advantages:

The individual value priorities represent the central goals of every single person and have therefore a close relationship to behaviour. Values are the most stable and enduring characteristics and are the foundation upon which attitudes and behaviours are formed. They constitute the basis for making crucial life decisions. A person's inner self can be seen as the product of the basic value system he has developed. Shared cultural values help to form possibilities of reward and orientation for people. Thus, values underlie the sanctions for some behavioural choices and the rewards for others. Values shape the living together in social institutions like family, school and working place strongly. The members of each cultural group share those social experiences which are relevant for the formation of values and as a consequence also to a large extent the moral concepts. The mean of value priorities of the members of a society shows the direction of the common enculturation independently from individual differences pointing thus to the underlying common cultural values.

Cultural syndromes

Triandis points out the construct of "cultural syndromes," which consist of shared attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values found among those who speak a particular language dialect, in a specific geographic region, during a particular historic period. The shared elements of subjective culture are organised around a theme, such as complexity, or the importance of the collective. *Cultural syndromes provide a focus, so that we can get out of the fuzzy construct of "culture" and into a construct that we can probe systematically* (Triandis, 2002).

Such syndromes for example can be encountered when the cultural complexity or the tightness of given societies are addressed. Cultural complexity refers to cultures that are simple (hunters and gatherers) or complex (information societies). Tight cultures have more rules, norms, and ideas about what is correct behaviour in various kinds of situations than loose cultures do. Triandis (1995) has suggested that individualism emerges in societies that are both complex and loose; collectivism in societies that are both simple and tight. The idea of individualism and collectivism will be more thoroughly analysed.

Other syndromes that can be used are the division by hierarchy to vertical and horizontal cultures or active and passive cultures differentiated by the degree individuals try to change the environment to fit them. It should be noted that cultural syndromes are correlated as it is obvious from the following examples where cultural syndromes overlap. The extent and the exact nature of this correlation is still open to research. The *ascription-achievement* disjunction refers to differences in societies where value judgements are made on the basis of ascribed attributes (sex, race, social status), rather than achieved attributes (skills, awards). *Emotional expression or suppression* refers to the disengaged expression of human emotions while under suppression the expression of emotion may be controlled with regard to the consequences. *Universalism-particularism refers to* cultures where people try to treat others on the basis of universal criteria in contrast to cultures where people treat others on the basis of individualistic criteria. One can identify many more syndromes, such as those reflected in the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) value orientations, the culture of honor (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), and others.

Special attention has been given on the collectivism-individualism construct. Individualistic cultures can be described by the fact that they sample mostly personal, internal attributes of persons while collectivist cultures sample mostly relationships, roles, norms and obligations. The fact that a given society is described as strongly individualistic or the opposite does not necessarily define its members. Within each culture there are individuals who are allocentric, and think and act like people in collectivist cultures, and also idiocentric, and think and act like people in individualist cultures. In addition not all collectivistic societies are similar; different kinds of collectivism may emerge.

The constructs of individualism and collectivism can be narrowed down to four defining attributes: a) *definition of the self b) structure of goals c) emphasis on norms versus attitudes d) emphasis on relatedness versus rationality.*

Individualism-Collectivism and Decision Making

Guss (2002) identifies three ways in which individualistic and collectivist values influence individuals' decision making. These values can influence the perception of the problem, the generation of strategies and alternatives, and the selection of an alternative. People with individualistic value orientations try to control a problematic situation through information gathering and thorough analysis. (Strohschneider & Guss, 1998). They are achievement-oriented and willing to take risks. Cross-cultural research has shown that they prefer active, confrontational strategies for resolving conflicts (Ohbuchi, Fukushima, & Tedeschi, 1999), are confident about their personal decisions (Mann, Radford, Burnett, Ford, Bond, Leung, Nakamura, Vaughan, & Yang, 1998) and might, therefore, be more decisive and risky than people in collectivist cultures in their decisions (Guss, 2002).

People with collectivist values weight more the social aspects of problems (Triandis, 1994) and may be risk-avoiding in uncertain and complex situations (Strohschneider & Guss, 1999). They pay attention to the social consequences and their consideration is not the maximisation of personal benefit. They value security, and follow passive and avoiding strategies (Ohbuchi et al., 1999).

Individualism-collectivism is a very broad dimension used to differentiate cultures. Many researchers have been focusing on individualism-collectivism and have provided an extended analysis of the structure as well as the links to the decision making process. It should be noted however that for a better understanding of social behaviour, models should include differentiations for other cultural syndromes that might be inter-related. Thus the vertical-horizontal dimension may intensify or weaken the strategies resulting from individualistic or collectivist value orientations (Guss, 2002). A vertical value orientation favouring a hierarchical social structure stresses the limitations of the individual's responsibility and initiative. This in the context of a collectivist culture may result in further avoidance of conflict situations and will certainly play a role in shaping behaviour.

Hofstede's mental programming

Hofstede conducted a comprehensive study on how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. From 1967 to 1973, while working at IBM as a psychologist, he collected and analyzed data from over 100,000 individuals from forty countries. From those results, and later additions, he developed a model that identifies four general dimensions of guidance for cognitive and behavioural actions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity. These dimensions of cultural context provide social effective criteria for orientation and evaluation of individual behaviour, which means that they influence attitude formation and attitude structuring processes in various domains of everyday life. Hofstede (1991) offers an approach of "culture" as the mental programming of members of society, which means, that central aspects of individual activities, such as food for example information processing, eating manners and handling of food products are influenced by general evaluative prescriptions and behavioural and cognitive scripts. His approach, although stressing the importance of values for cultural comparison, is being restricted by the nature of the database (employee data) and its value orientation in the domain of companies or work environment.

Schwartz value system

Shalom Schwartz (1992) defines a value as a transsituational goal that varies in importance as a guiding principle in one's life, and developed a theory about the internal structure of the value domain that received empirical support in over 40 countries (Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995). Schwartz & Sagiv (1995, p.109) summarise their findings as follows:

The empirical findings regarding the revised theory show that (a) There is substantial support that 10 motivationally distinct value types are recognized across cultures and used to express value priorities; (b) These value types form a system of compatible and conflicting motivations that are arrayed on a motivational continuum in most cultures. Two basic dimensions that organize value systems (Openness to Change vs. Conservation and Self-Transcendence vs. Self-Enhancement) are virtually universal; (c) 44 specific values have highly consistent meanings across cultures. They can be used to form cross-culturally comparable indexes of the importance attributed to each value type.

Ten different value types, each characterised by their own motivational goal, were identified: Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity, Security, Power, and Achievement. According to Schwartz (1992), these value types can be organised in a two dimensional circular circumflex structure based on a theoretical analysis of the compatibilities and conflicts between their respective motivational goals. Value types with compatible goals are positively related and emerge adjacent to one another in the two-dimensional representation. Value types with conflicting goals are negatively related and are situated opposite one another.

Schwartz (1992) identified three main conflicts within this value structure. The first conflict is a conflict between openness to change and conservation, which opposes value types referring to novelty and personal autonomy (Stimulation & Self-direction) to value types leading to stability, certainty and social order (Tradition, Conformity & Security). A second conflict is a conflict between self-enhancement and self-transcendence, which opposes value types referring to the pursuit of selfish interests (Achievement & Power) to value types promoting the welfare of both close and distant others (Benevolence & Universalism). A third conflict is a conflict between values referring to the gratification of one's desires (Hedonism) and values implying self-restraint and the acceptance of external limits (Tradition & Conformity).

By imposing two additional restrictions on the value domain, namely the restriction that all value types are situated on a perfect circle and the restriction that all value types are situated at an equidistant position from one another, it is possible to construct integrated hypotheses about how external variables should relate to the value types. The correlations should decrease from the most positively related to the most negatively related value type and vice versa. In this way, three possible patterns of correlations with the value types can be defined that relate to the major conflicts in the value domain. First, an external variable that relates most positively to Tradition should relate to the conflict between Hedonism and Tradition. In that case, one can also expect that variable to relate most negatively to Hedonism, with correlations decreasing from Tradition over Benevolence, Universalism, Self-Direction and Stimulation to Hedonism and increasing from Hedonism over Achievement, Power, Security and Conformity to Tradition. This pattern of relations will be referred to as the Hedonism vs. Tradition pattern. In a similar pattern the other variables may be addressed.

Schwartz shows that, with the exception of China, specific values mostly do "cluster" and "compete" as expected. His results suggest an important universality to how values are organised cross-culturally and that societies differ in the clusters of values predominating public life.


Data and method

Secondary data from the ESS (European Social Survey) have been used in order to draw useful conclusions on the potential for using Schwartz type data in order to explain attitude formation and attitude structuring processes in various domains of everyday life, especially in relation to food issues. The European Social Survey (the ESS) is a new, academically-driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between

Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. Data collection is planned to take place every two years, starting in September 2002, by means of face to face interviews of around an hour in duration, followed by a short self-completion supplement.

In this section four European countries are analysed (Germany, Greece, Netherlands and Spain). Countries were selected so that insight in previous research could be drawn under the limitations of availability as the data from the ESS survey were being published during our research. Value types were grouped according to main conflicts within the value structure as identified by Schwartz (1992).

Results

The degree of importance for each group was calculated through the construction of sumindices aggregating the relative importance of each value. Attaching a score of 1 to absolute agreement to the relevant statement and a score of 6 to total disagreement, the higher the scores the less important a value is. It should be noted however that the following graphical design should be interpreted carefully.
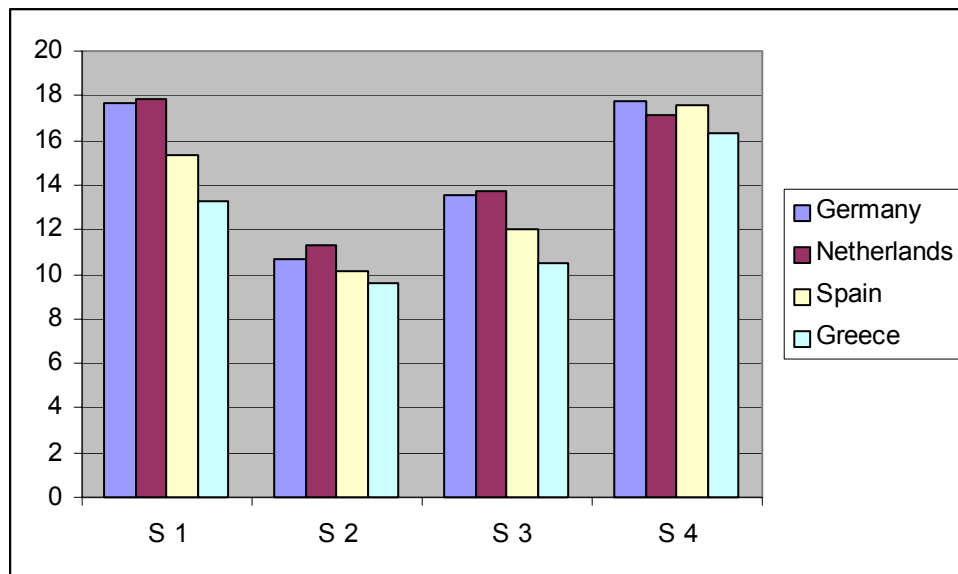
S1 = Tradition + Conformity + Security
S2 = Universalism + Benevolence
S3 = Achievment + Power
S4 = Self-Direction + Stimulation + Hedonism

Figure 1: Main groupings within the value structure (data: ESS, 2002)

Discussion of results and concluding remarks

Trying to interpret the results the first striking observation is the pattern of orientation. Reflections of the cultural cleavage between the Northern and Southern countries of Europe, which has been employed to explain existing differences in rejection rates towards GM food products (Bredahl, 2001; Hamstra, 1991; Hoban and Kendall, 1992), can be also met on the ESS results. Although the analysis is narrowed down to 4 countries, it is still

apparent especially in syndromes 1 and 3 that Greece and Spain follow similar patterns, while Netherlands and Germany are not distant from each other either. It should be noted here that a quantitative approach addressing these correlations might further add to the discussion but additional data would also be needed.

In the first column (S1) it is perceptible that in Greece and in Spain people tend to consider more important values associating to stability, certainty and social order than in Germany and the Netherlands. As in these southern countries relationships are especially regulated by social norms, one would expect that attitude formation is going on in familial interactions by adapting to the expectations of and information exchange with high status family members. In these cultures one would expect, that people, when forming their attitudes towards important issues like GM food, would mainly rely on beliefs and perceptions, which carry on family norms and traditions. Additionally, prominence towards security can be related to higher uncertainty that surrounds all revolutionary technological leaps including modern biotechnology, further explaining existing differences in attitudes towards GM food. Contrasting, in Germany and the Netherlands with generally lower significance put upon these values influence from significant others should be weaker in attitude formation. Instead, other, non-social factors, like scientific knowledge on GM processes should get more prominent in differentiating approving or disapproving attitudes towards GM food.

Value types associated with the promotion of welfare of close and distant others (S2) do not present significant differences for the selected countries. In cases where a construct of these value types is negatively associated to genetic engineering, it is fair to expect that it would be more significant in attitude formation in countries where strong importance is attached to this value type. In other words, the perception of genetic engineering as being unnatural or harmful for the environment would play a more important role in forming negative attitudes in countries where this category is valued high.

Value types presented in S2 (promoting the welfare of close and distant others) oppose to value types leading to pursuit of selfish interests (S3). When a given culture needs to prioritise relationships and goals, the relative importance attached to these value types may play a crucial role. Giving priority to relationships considering the needs of the others, even when there is no benefit for the individual, may lead to differing attitudes towards modern biotechnology. The direction of these attitudes will depend on a number of factors. Thus, while rationality presupposes the careful calculation of the advantages and the disadvantages associated with a given relationship before any action is taken, prioritising personal goals over in-group goals may lead to actions that neglect the needs of future generations and /or the environment. It is not a great conceptual leap to link this notion to attitudes directly associated to GM food. Companies investing in food biotechnology belong to a great percentage at the private sector the way that the alleged benefits will be shared to those who need them is left partly indecisive. Thus a cost-benefit analysis valuing the introduction of a new GM variety would be a pre-requisite for its introduction but a positive result on the benefits side would not constitute a panacea. Individuals strongly orientated towards universalism would oppose the introduction of new technologies even when clear-cut benefits are estimated, as long as the analysis is static, does not allow for the calculation of externalities and does not guarantee decent benefit sharing.

 S4 presents value types leading to novelty, personal autonomy and hedonism. Self direction and stimulation as opposed to tradition, security and conformity, lead to a calculation of associated costs and benefits before any attitude is formed. When a given culture is in general values prioritising personal autonomy, idiocentric individuals will not base their opinions on others and as already stated may well depend in a great extent, upon scientific knowledge in order to form their attitudes.

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