Exploring cultural dimensions of Mexican project managers

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Abstract

Research on multicultural management is extended. Much of the work is based on Hofstede’s studies which address four cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1983). However, not much has been done focusing on project management and even less about the cultural dimensions of Mexican project managers. Octavio Paz in his prized novel Labyrinth of the Solitude (1976) and Samuel Ramos in his classic The Profile of Man and Mexican Culture (1951) have pointed out common traits associated to Mexicans like solitude, improvisation, and low self-esteem as. These do not happen to be the best qualities for project managers; therefore, the main purpose of this research is to explore and understand Mexican’s project managers behavior under three specific cultural dimensions (Kets de Vries, 2001): private-public space orientation, competitive-collaborative relations, and monochronic-polychronic time orientation. A survey was applied to more than a hundred project managers. Results show that they are oriented towards public space and a collaborative relation rather than a competitive one. Although available literature on the subject refers that Mexicans have a polychronic time orientation (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2007), this belief was not supported by the data. The resulting orientations are discussed and compared with some project management competences described in the IPMA-ICB v3 Standard, trying to unveil an indication of Mexican project managers’ performance. The results shed light on Mexican and perhaps also Latin American project managers’ performance when working in multicultural teams.

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Keywords: multicultural project management; Mexican culture at work; culture comparative studies; project management competences.

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1. Introduction

The amount of projects in a global environment is growing every day, and their successful implementation requires of individuals with a mixture of cultural and functional skills working into an organizational unity called “project team” (Ranf, 2010). For this cell to be effective, it is necessary to be aware of the challenges arising due to cultural differences.

In the last 30 years, much has been written about cultural differences among professionals from different cultures and their corresponding effects in productivity. The seminal work of Hofstede (1983a) identifying and describing four cultural dimensions was a milestone. Since then, many studies have explored, tested, and applied his model in different areas and countries. However, only a few studies have led to explore new cultural considerations focused on project management (PM) (Burchel & Gilden, 2008) and much less on the culture of Mexican project managers.

To Mexicans in general time happens to be a loose concept and work is less important than family or friends’ relationship (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2007). PM success however is strongly related to time and work to be done, what can then be expected from Mexican project managers competing in global scenarios?

This paper describes a research done in Mexico aimed at exploring Mexican project managers’ behaviors under three specific cultural dimensions proposed by Kets de Vries (2001): public space orientation, cooperative relationship, and polychronic time. A brief review of the literature is developed first where the culture and behavior of Mexicans are explored. Then the research design and results are proposed; they are based on three hypotheses and a quantitative analysis of more than one hundred answered questionnaires. Lastly, the analysis and implications for Mexican and Latin American project managers in general are presented.

2. Literature review

The concept of culture used throughout this investigation refers mainly to the values, beliefs, and principles that characterize a group of individuals rooted on their ethnic background (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2007).

Regarding studies about the Mexican culture, two essays published in the last century represent the most complete picture of typical Mexicans living in Mexico and the USA. Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico, written by Samuel Ramos in 1934, and The Labyrinth of the Solitude by Octavio Paz in 1950 an oeuvre that won a novel prize.

“The Mexican undervalues himself, not so much because he is inferior, but because he believes it,” wrote Ramos (1951). “Within an extensive group of individuals with members in all of the social classes, one observes character traits like distrust, aggressiveness, and hypersensitivity to insult,” observed the author in referring to his contemporary Mexican “paisanos” in the 40s and 50s. The origin of this inferiority feeling might be rooted on the Spanish conquest and the Colony period, when the vast majority of the population, composed by Indians and Mestizos, was discriminated first by the minority of Spanish conquerors and later by the Creole social class.

Concerning team work and planning skills, Mexicans do not seem to be particularly competent. Ramos, wrote “The most striking aspect of Mexican character, at first sight, is distrust (...) does not distrust any man or woman, in particular; he distrusts all men and all women” and “In México each man concerns himself only with immediate issues. He works for today and tomorrow, never for later (...) He has therefore suppressed from his life one of its most important dimensions –the future.” A bit of ingenuity is a particularity of Mexicans, concedes Ramos “He is ingenious in detracting to others at the point of annihilating them.”

The essayist and poet Octavio Paz (1976) agreed with Samuel Ramos referring to Mexicans “an inferiority complex influenced our preference for analysis and that the meagerness of our creative output was due not so much to the growth of our critical faculties at the expense of our creativity as it was to our instinctive doubts of our abilities.” He describes directly and not less cruelly a particular trait of Mexicans that rises strong doubts around Mexicans’ capacity to openly and sincerely work in teams in the way we read in PM treatments and standards: “The Mexican (...) seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile. In his harsh solitude, which is both barbed and courteous, everything serves him as a defense: silence and words, politeness and disdain, irony and resignation.” On the other hand, the acute writer unveils a more attractive and collective attitude when it is about partying, “The solitary Mexican loves fiestas and public gatherings. Any occasion for getting together will serve, any pretext to stop the flow of time and commemorate men and events with
festivals and ceremonies.” Indeed, even up to these days, many ending events regardless of the final result are occasions to celebrate with *pompa y júbilo* (ceremoniously and joyfully).

Hewes, GW (1954) studied deeply the conduct of Mexicans and the author highlights the work and comments of José Ezequiel Iturriaga, an excellent Mexican journalist and politician observer; Hewes points out: “Iturriaga characterizes his countrymen as sentimental, introverted, indecisive, seldom punctual, usually vague in their notions of space and time, and unable to arrive at positive conclusions” (Hewes, 1954, p. 221). The author also remarks what might be a hurdle for Mexicans to become good project managers: “The culture pattern puts very little pressure on the individual to finish what he begins: pertinacity is a rare attribute” (Hewes, 1954, p. 221). Hewes was even intrigued by José Carrion’s meaning of a Mexican “micromania”, which is found in speech, where diminutives and super diminutives abound, like “chico” (small), “chiquito” (very small) and “chiquitito” (very very small, but not the smallest) (Hewes, 1954, p. 221). It is to this regard a very famous Mexican expression “ahorita” which is a diminutive of “ahora” (now). *Ahorita voy* whose translation is “I go now” is rather a non-temporary expression of action conveniently interpreted by the teller as of today, later, tomorrow and not few times, never.

One of the most influential treatments of culture and its effects on labor was Hofstede’s proposal of four cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1983). Based on extended research with employees (including Mexicans) from an international worldwide company, Hofstede postulated that the behavior of people due to ethnic grounds can be classified into four constructs or dimensions briefly described as follows (Hofstede 1983).

- **Power distance.** This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Mexico is classified within the large power distance countries whereas the USA and the Nordic countries are the opposite, small power distance.
- **Individualism versus collectivism.** Individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Its opposite, collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioned loyalty. México ranks low individualism, while the USA, Canada, and Sweden for instance, rank high.
- **Masculinity versus Femininity.** The masculine side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Mexico is classified within the countries with the higher indices in Masculinity but countries like Sweden, Norway, and Yugoslavia are supposed to behave as Feminine ones.
- **Uncertainty avoidance.** This dimension expresses the degree to which the members within a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. Mexico is positioned as a country with strong uncertainty avoidance, but not so strong as Greece and Portugal. Countries with weak uncertainty avoidance are, for instance, Singapore and Denmark.

Hofstede (1983b) concludes that PM is best suited for individualistic societies. The author asserts that low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance are indicators of cultures where individuals perform better in managing projects; Mexican culture shows the opposite. Hofstede (1983b, p47) then indicates, “it is clear that PM suits the culture of the USA better than many others.”

Bredillet, Yatim & Ruiz (2010) studied the relationship between Hofstede’s original four dimensions and National scores to the ability to implement PM in 74 countries, including Mexico. Researchers measured the PM implementation index as the ratio between PMI certified individuals and the total population. They also analyzed the relationship of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with successful project implementation. Their exploratory study shows that Mexico scoring large power distance has a poor project implementation (few certified project managers). In countries with low GDP PM is better deployed if they rank high regarding individualism, but Mexico has low score on this dimension.

Other investigations proposed new dimensions. Trompenaars (1993) described seven; Schwartz (1992) listed eleven motivating values; and Hall & Hall (1990) identified four relevant dimensions. Milosevic (2002) configured a list of ten values and its influence on PM. For instance, the author suggests that cultures living in a benign nature (like Mexico and other Latin-American countries) define the scope in a rather loosely way whereas cultures
accustomed to carry on against inclement nature tend to be very precise in defining goals and scope. Kets de Vries (2001) built a model called the wheel of culture (Figure 1) to identify nine cultural dimensions related to eighteen cultural lines or continua.

Three dimensions and three cultural lines were selected to develop this research: Space (Private – Public), Relationship (Competitive – Cooperative), and Time (Monochronic – Polychronic) (Table 1). Only three were chosen for the sake of analyzing deeper few dimensions, because they are important in understanding multicultural PM, and they were of particular interest to the authors.

![Figure 1 The Wheel of Culture (Kets de Vries, 2001)](image)

Table 1. Cultural dimensions and lines selected to measure Mexican project managers’ culture patterns, from Kets de Vries (2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Cultural line</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Private - Public</td>
<td>How does an individual demarcate his/her physical and psychological immediate environment? Private oriented people value their personal space, and information is provided to others only when necessary. Public oriented people like proximity to others and value sharing information. This dimension also refers to the way individuals respect (or do not respect) another person’s privacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Competitive - Cooperative</td>
<td>Are people motivated by competition or cooperation? Competitive cultures value actions and decisions based on competitive motivations. Cooperative cultures value actions and decisions which are socially responsible, being more concerned with everyone’s overall quality of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Monochronic - Polychronic</td>
<td>What is a person’s attitude towards the use of time? Monochronic people prefer to do and deal with things one at a time. Polychronic people prefer to do and manage many things at once. In this case, the time is seen as loose and not necessarily in a linear or sequential fashion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Monochronic cultures are used to follow rules of privacy and consideration as well as adhere religiously to plans. Polychronic can be easily distracted, but they also tend to manage interruptions well with a willingness to change plans often and easily. If you live in the United States, Canada, or Northern Europe, you live in a monochronic
culture. If you live in Latin America, the Arab part of the Middle East, or sub-Saharan Africa, you live in a polychronic culture (Rutledge, 2011). Moran, Harris & Moran al (2007) argue that in Mexico, there is a relaxed polychronic attitude towards time. Schedule is important, but to an extent that it does not interfere with family or close friends’ relationships.

Gilden (2005) surveyed “western” project managers regarding the dimensions of the wheel. First they were asked about their self-perception and second about what they perceived from Asian team members. “Western” was defined as someone who was born into a Western family (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, the USA, Western Europe), and has been both educated and employed in a Western nation prior to employment in the Asian region. The Asian team members included people born in Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Hong Kong, and China. All surveyed project managers and team members were working in the same multinational company. The results relating only the three dimensions studied here are shown in Table 2, where differences between Westerns and Asians are evident. Notoriously, western project managers describe themselves rather as polychromic (3.85) whereas it has been mentioned above that the USA culture tends to be monochronyc.

Table 2 Self-perception and perceptions towards Asian team members from Western project managers in a multinational company (From Gilden 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Culture line</th>
<th>Western project managers’ self-perception</th>
<th>Western project managers’ perception of Asian team members</th>
<th>Continua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Public - Private</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1 – Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 – Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Competitive - Collaborative</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1 – Competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 – Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Monochronic – Polychronic</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1 – Monochronic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 - Polychronic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the previous literature research and the authors’ knowledge and experiences in Mexico as Mexicans, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Mexican project managers keep a public space orientation rather than keep things privately;
H2: Mexican project managers observe a cooperative relationship, rather than a competitive one;
H3: Mexican project managers are oriented towards polychronic time, instead of monochronic.

3. Research methodology

The approach to develop a reasonable sampling methodology in order to carry out this study was to consider the PM professional organizations. The collaborating organizations were the Asociación Mexicana de Ingeniería de Proyectos (AMIP), that is the Mexican representative of the International Project Management Association (IPMA); the LinkedIn group of the PM training program of Tecnológico de Monterrey; and the Mexican chapters in Sinaloa, Jalisco, Nuevo León and Puebla of the Project Management Institute (PMI). The approximate total number of members of these organizations was around 1200.

A questionnaire was developed using the three dimensions proposed by Kets de Vries (2001). Designed questions were intended to measure specific cultural patterns of behavior, values, and attitudes for each of the three selected dimensions. A pilot study was carried out and the questionnaire was self-applied to a small group of project managers linked to an activity of the PM training program of Tecnológico de Monterrey. The aim was to ensure the questions were clear and not ambiguous or confusing. After pertinent corrections were made, an online questionnaire was developed and made available to the professional organizations collaborating with the study.

The questions were organized into three sections, and most of the questions had a closed form. Section one contained 15 statements related to attitudes, in terms of the extent to which the respondent agreed with each statement by selecting a response within a four-level Likert-type scale. Each of the 15 statements had four pre-coded responses in order to measure levels of agreement/disagreement with the given statement: strongly agree, agree,
disagree, and strongly disagree. For example, a project manager declared to what extent he/she agreed or disagreed with statements like, I like sharing my work space with coworkers or Sharing my working space distracts me from my work activities. Statements related to the cooperative-competitive dimension were like, I usually work in team groups because it yields the best results. Some of the statements related to the monochronic-polychronic dimension were, Time is the most important resource at work or It is important to me building long-lasting personal relationships with my work contacts.

On the other hand, section two contained nine items in which the respondent declared how often they act according to the given statements. Coded responses to questions from section two were in a four-level scale as follows: always, very frequently, occasionally, and never. Examples of these statements are: I work with the office door closed (Space dimension); I share my working skills with my (Relationship dimension) and; I work in a single activity until it is finished instead of working on several activities at a time (Time dimension).

Respondents provided demographic information in section three as age, gender, and experience on the PM field. The survey was anonymously filled in and no personal information was requested. A total of 111 responses from national participants were collected.

Although the obtained sample was not the result of a random sampling approach it is believed that active members of the PM professional organizations would represent the active project managers in México. In consequence, the results from the analyzed sample are considered to be representative of their cultural behavior.

4. Results

Based on the 111 interviews, coded answers were recorded for different questions regarding each of the three dimensions. Coded answers from 1 to 4 were oriented towards one single direction, the more, the better regarding the research hypotheses: higher scores favor a public space orientation, a cooperative orientation, or a polychronic orientation. Averages of the questions corresponding to every dimension were computed for every individual. Population means for the three dimensions were analyzed by a t-test, and a significance level of $D=0.05$ was used. Null hypotheses stated the corresponding population mean is less or equal to 2.5, the scale middle point, versus the research hypotheses each stating that the mean is higher than 2.5. This means that the research hypotheses, public, cooperative and polychronic oriented managers will be favored by sample score values higher than 2.5.

As a result of the analyses, it is found that two of the three research hypotheses were strongly supported by the collected data. A private orientation of the project managers represented by the sample data is rejected in favor of a public orientation with a sample mean of 2.792 (s.e. 0.045), a t statistic $t=6.53$ and a p-value less than 0.001. Similarly, the competitive orientation is rejected in favor of a collaborative orientation with a sample mean of 2.96 (s.e. 0.034), a $t=13.70$ and a p-value less than 0.001. On the other hand, no statistical evidence was found to support a polychronic orientation of project managers. The sample mean for the monochronic-polychronic dimension was 2.395 (s.e. 0.023), which fell below the 2.5 score stated in the null hypothesis. Therefore, the recorded data provided no evidence of polychronic oriented project managers. The corresponding test statistic was $t=-4.56$ and a p-value of 1.0. This can be interpreted as a sample not statistically different from one coming from a population of monochronic oriented project managers.

Further analyses were performed in the monochronic-polychronic dimension to unveil any differences regarding gender and having or not international experience in PM. As a result, no statistical differences were found between male and female project managers. The 24 female project managers had a sample average of 2.38 (s.e. 0.044) and the 87 male project managers an average of 2.40 (s.e. 0.027), the t statistic for the difference between gender groups gave an absolute value of $|t|=0.38$, with 42 d.f. and p=0.709 for the two sided hypothesis of difference in either direction with respect to the gender group. Similarly, a comparison was performed between mean scores for project managers saying that they had international experience and for those saying they did not. Fifty seven project managers had no international experience and had a sample mean in the polychronic dimension of 2.395 (s.e 0.032) while 54 had international experience and a mean score of 2.396 (s.e. 0.049), the t statistic with 107 d.f. for the difference gave an absolute value of $|t|=0.02$ and p=0.981 for the two sided hypothesis, obtaining no significant difference between the two groups.
5. Analysis and implications

Results from this investigation revealed that the registered data provided statistically significant evidence that the Mexican project managers active in the participating professional organizations have a public space orientation (mean 2.792). According to Table 3 above, they tend to like proximity to others and value the sharing of information, they prefer public spaces and show little or not respect to another person’s privacy.

In analysing this result one finds subtle evidence of validation. Paz (1976) mentioned that the solitary Mexican loves fiestas and public gatherings. Mexicans ranked low individualism in Hofstede’s research, and therefore, one might infer a tendency to public space orientation. Stephens & Geer (1995) highlighted a more collectivist and friendship behaviour as conditions of Mexicans to do business. Maybe a number of Mexican project managers nowadays have overcome the solitude stigma attributed to the typical Mexicans by Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos. The preference for being public might be rooted in specific training received to fulfil their professional career. Although, not statistically comparable, some Western project managers also tend to be oriented towards public space (Gilden, 2005). A brief examination on PM competences will help to elucidate whether the public space dimension is favourable for improving performance.

The International Competence Baseline (ICB, 2006) describes 46 elements of the competency for Project Managers. The element 2.06 – Openness suggests by definition a public –not closed performance, obviously a dose of discretion is necessary as the following statement of the competence outlines: “The normal policy would be to share all the information he/she can without divulging confidences or secrets.” Hence, project managers oriented towards public space orientation seem to be naturally inclined to the openness element of the competency.

Relating the competitive – cooperative dimension, an average closer to 3 (2.97) was obtained. This implies that a majority of the Mexican project managers surveyed observed a cooperative pattern. According to Table 3 above, they value actions and decisions that are socially responsible, being concerned with everyone’s quality of life.

Paz and Ramos asserted that Mexicans had a feeling of inferiority that in general might be a cause of low competitiveness. Insecurity might cause people to rely on others to feel protection; therefore, a more collaborative relationship might be expected. The lack of pertinacity in terms of not finishing what they begin (Hewes, 1954) seems also a hurdle to competitiveness. The small group of Western project managers surveyed by Gilden (2005) happens to consider themselves slightly oriented towards competitiveness. Is this apparent lack of competitiveness a problem for the Mexican professionals in PM?

The ICB (2006) element of the competence 2.08 Results orientation is probably the most representative evidence of competitiveness as can be perceived through sentences like “get things done” and “close link between project results and success.” Under this interpretation, Mexican project managers might probably need to increase their abilities to get results, even perhaps against their cultural preference to tie friendly relationships.

Finally, the polychronic orientation of the surveyed project managers could not be proved. The sample mean 2.395 (s.e. 0.023) fell below the 2.5 score stated in the null hypothesis. Although there is a tendency towards a monochronic use of time, the experiment design does not allow one to confirm this orientation either. According to the Table 3 above, the monochronic pattern is related to the preference of individuals to do or deal with things one at a time.

Iturriaga, cited by Hewes (1954) stated that Mexicans are seldom punctual, and they are vague in their notions of space and time. This can be an indication that they tend to be polychronic because within this dimension, time is seen as a loose concept (Table 1). Moran, Harris & Moran (2007) observed on Mexicans a polychronic attitude towards time. Although not statistically comparable, Table (Table 2) shows that Western project managers are inclined towards polychronicity.

The element of the competence 1.11 Time and project phases is described using words like “structuring,” “sequencing,” “critical path,” and other similar expressions that seem to unveil a project manager able to do one thing at a time. Rutledge (2011) emphasizes that monochronic cultures adhere religiously to plans whereas polychronic ones tend to change plans often and easily. Goldrath (1997) criticizes multi-tasking on the basis of wasting time in setting up each one of the different tasks to be performed by a person. In sum, monochronic orientation looks like a more favorable condition to perform well in PM, at least in the traditional view. Modern PM, involving concurrent engineering in developing new products for instance, requires project managers skilled in
planning and executing tasks in parallel to avoid rework and finishing earlier (Morris & López Miranda, 1997). Perhaps project managers in general need to develop the ability to do many things at a time to deal with the different disciplines and stakeholders’ profile within a project, even more if they are in charge of Programs or Portfolios.

To what extent might these results be extended into other countries? Even though confirmatory research should be done, the common historic roots of Latin American people make believe that project managers from these countries need to observe similar recommendations to improve performance. More research is recommended in Latin American nations to explore the other dimensions of the wheel of culture to have a complete picture of the behavioral patterns of Latin people leading projects.

References


