Uncertainty Avoidance and Classroom Interaction: Implications for Language Teaching

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1. Introduction

This paper will examine classroom interactions in light of Hofstede's cultural dimension of 'uncertainty avoidance', along with implications for language teaching methodology. The situation on which this paper will focus is that of a Western language instructor teaching Japanese university students, since is a situation where cross-cultural factors will figure into classroom interaction.

1.1 Teaching Japanese students

Newly arrived western language instructors often find teaching Japanese students to be challenging and, at times, completely frustrating. According to Fred Anderson, what Western teachers found most frustrating about their Japanese students were that they "rarely initiate discussion, seldom ask questions for clarification, seldom volunteer answers and talk only if there is a clear cut answer to a question". He elaborates as follows:

> "They seldom volunteer answers, a trait that many Western instructors find extremely frustrating. Most Japanese will only talk if specifically called upon, and only then if there is a clear-cut answer. But even if the answer is obvious, it may be preceded by a pause so long that the instructor is tempted to supply the answer first. This type of pause -- or even a true silence -- does not necessarily signify an unwillingness to comply, but may simply indicate that the student is too nervous to respond, or too uncertain of the answer to risk public embarrassment." (Doyon 2000)

1.2 Culture clash.

These behaviors, typical of many students, suggest that Japanese students experience a high level of discomfort when interacting in English. This discomfort could rise partly from the uncertainty of interacting in a non-native language, and partly from differing expectations regarding roles and methodology in the classroom. The result is a culture clash that leads to teacher frustration, as well as inhibited learner success.

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2. Hofstede's dimensions of culture.

Hofstede (1991:5) defines culture as, "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". Hofstede's definition indicates that there is a common program, a common way of thinking, that is the basis for group behavior. Though there are individual variations within the group, he focuses on the shared or 'collective' ways of thinking and behaving which are generally agreed upon as the norm. This constitutes the group's 'culture'. Hofstede devised four categories, or dimensions, by which he could compare cultural groups: These four dimensions are:

1) Weak/Strong Power Distance: The extent to which a group accepts inequality of power among its members.
2) Weak/Strong Uncertainty Avoidance: The extent to which a group is willing to accept ambiguity and take risks.
3) Individualism vs. Collectivism: The extent to which a group prioritizes the individual over the group, and vice-versa.
4) Masculinity vs. Femininity. The extent to which a group prioritizes assertiveness and achievement vs. relationships and caring, and vice-versa.

2.1 Uncertainty avoidance: Japanese and Anglo-American scores

Brown (2000:190) defines uncertainty avoidance as "the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truths."

On Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index (see appendix) Japan scores at +110. This is on a scale where positive scores indicate stronger uncertainty avoidance and negative scores indicate weaker uncertainty avoidance. Anglo-American cultures tend to rank weak along the index. For example, Australia scores at -60, Canada at -72, the USA at -81, and Great Britain at -126.

2.2. Uncertainty avoidance in the classroom

Hofstede's dimensions of culture have been applied to not only national, but also organizational and classroom culture. When teachers from Anglo-American cultures

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that share a tendency toward weak uncertainty avoidance are teaching Japanese students whose culture tends towards strong uncertainty avoidance, this mismatch can lead to misunderstandings, especially when the teacher interprets student behavior by his or her own cultural norms.

The table below contrasts some elements of uncertainty avoidance as manifested in the classroom:

Table 1: Uncertainty Avoidance in classroom interaction

Weak Uncertainty Avoidance	**Strong Uncertainty Avoidance**
Students are active participants. *Teachers expect interaction.*	*Students are passive recipients* *Teachers do not expect interaction.*
Students are eager to speak. *Teachers expect to be questioned.*	*Students are reluctant to speak.* *Teachers do not expect to be questioned.*
Risks are confronted.	*Risks are avoided.*
Creativity is valued.	*Accuracy is valued.*

When discussing cultural differences, however, we need to be careful not fall into the trap of stereotyping. While the table above describes tendencies within a cultural group, it is important to keep in mind that there are still large variations in the degree to which uncertainty avoidance is manifested by individuals within the same group.

Lets examine in detail each item in the table, along with implications for language learning and teaching.

3. Student passivity and reluctance to speak.

As a whole, the Japanese education system has traditionally emphasized passive learning. In other words, the teacher lectures while the students 'soak up' the knowledge as it is handed to them. Student input has generally not been the norm. Students are expected to listen, to take notes, but not to speak up. Knowledge therefore tends to flow in one direction only: from teacher to student. (Williams 1994:10) While there certainly are Western teachers who for the most part adhere to a lecture-style of teaching, Western education as a whole tends to be more Socratic in its approach. Knowledge grows from the give and take of interaction between

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teachers and students, with students being encouraged to ask questions, even to the point of challenging their teachers.
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The traditional, passive style of language learning, with its focus on grammar and translation, works well in the Japanese education system for what it was intended, that is, for helping students pass university entrance examinations. However, it does not encourage oral language proficiency, and as a result, despite six or more years of English language instruction, Japanese university students remain rather challenged by speaking and listening tasks. (Hinenoya & Gatbonton 2000:227)

Interaction is necessary for building the skills needed for communicative competence. Brown (1994:159) states that "after several decades of research on teaching and learning languages, we have discovered that the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself." Japanese students, however, may not be accustomed to the active learner role which the typical Western teacher expects of them, preferring instead to stick with the passive role with which they are more comfortable. Students' passivity, along with a reluctance to speak, could explain why Japanese students are often described by their teachers as being shy.

3.1 Shyness as a cultural trait.

According to Philip Zimbardo, who has done extensive research on shyness, the Japanese more than other nationalities were more likely to report feeling shy in all social situations, with 57 percent classifying themselves as shy. (Doyon 2000) Zimbardo defines shyness as:

> "a mental attitude that predisposes people to be extremely concerned about the social evaluation of them by others. As such, it creates a keen sensitivity to cues of being rejected. There is a readiness to avoid people and situations that hold any potential for criticism of the shy person's appearance or conduct. It involves keeping a low profile by holding back from initiating actions that might call attention to one's self." (Doyon 2000)

Shyness tends to surface when individuals are faced with a novel situation, be it a stranger, an unfamiliar environment, or an unfamiliar routine, situations where the

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procedural or social rules are not yet known. Shyness as a cultural trait is quite likely a manifestation of the lower tolerance for uncertainty that is characteristic of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures such as Japan.

Other factors within Japanese culture contribute to the shyness label as well, for instance the value that Japanese culture places on non-verbal communication and a cultural mistrust of language. (Hinenoya & Gatbonton 2000:225) Brownell goes as far to state that the Japanese "value not-speaking even to the extent of leaving the most fundamental things unspoken, accessible only by intuition because they believe that the message should be understood through actions and feelings". (Hinenoya & Gatbonton 2000:230). This was aptly reflected by a Japanese student of mine who wrote that the world would be a better place 'if people could understand each other without language'.

3.2 Shyness in language learning

In light of Zimbardo's definition, shyness in the classroom can be viewed as a strategy to avoid rejection and negative social evaluation. Interacting in a foreign language provokes anxiety because the person feels he or she is presenting a less than flattering image of him or herself. Horwitz (2000:258) likens it to wearing unflattering clothing, or having a 'bad hair day'. She further explains that, "few people can appear equally intelligent, sensitive, witty, and so on when speaking a second language as when speaking their first: This disparity between how we see ourselves and how we think others see us has been my consistent explanation for language learner's anxieties."

3.3 Shyness and social domains

Japanese reluctance to speak is not constant, but rather changes depending on the social situation. Lebra divides Japanese society into three domains, each with differing norms for interaction. These are the ritual domain, the intimate domain, and the anomic domain. (Doyon 2000)

The anomic domain describes anonymous behavior where strangers temporarily rub shoulders, such as on trains, in elevators, and on crowded streets. Classrooms operate within the ritual domain. Behavior here is very formal and highly guarded. The

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intimate domain is where the Japanese are most relaxed and spontaneous. This domain typically encompasses family, close friends, and coworkers.

To the extent that Japanese students view the EFL class as belonging to the ritual domain, they will be continue to be reluctant to speak. What is needed is to encourage students to switch domains, to move them away from the formalistic, rigid behaviors of the ritual domain and towards the relaxed, spontaneous behaviors characteristic of the intimate domain.

3.4 Moving into the intimate domain.

Doyon suggests some ways to create intimacy in the classroom. In addition to group and pair work, he mentions keeping a language learning journal which students can share with their classmates. He also advises having the students, and the teacher as well, use first names with each other. (Doyon 2000) Since first names in Japanese society are used only with family and friends, it's association with the intimate domain can have a positive impact towards encouraging relaxed, spontaneous interaction in the classroom.

Having students sit at their desk with the teacher in front is a standard classroom is an image commonly associated with the ritual domain. Therefore, another way to encourage students to disassociate the classroom from that domain is to dispel that image. One way to do that is, from the very first day of class, to get students out of their seats and moving around. Mixer type activities such as the popular "Find someone who. . . ." are very useful for this. Proximity and intimacy go hand in hand for the teacher as well. By walking around, the teacher is more accessible to the students. Physical movement also has the added bonus of releasing tension and promoting relaxation.

In the traditional classroom, students are usually seated in rows. Therefore, to the extent possible, teachers should experiment with different seating arrangements. For example, in one of my classes where the furniture was luckily not bolted to the floor, a few weeks into the course I changed the seating arrangement such that students moved their desks to face their partner. This change yielded a positive effect on the classroom atmosphere. The students seemed more relaxed, smiled more, and seemed

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more willing to initiate interaction with their teacher. Though the evidence here is anecdotal, seen in light of Lebra's social domains, it stands to reason that perhaps the shift in seating arrangements which facilitated more intimate face to face contact between students coincided with a shift in students' perception of the classroom's domain.

4. Risks are avoided.

In research into learner success, a willingness to take calculated risks is strongly associated with learner success. Learners "have to be able to gamble a bit, to be willing to try out hunches about the language and take the risk of being wrong". (Brown 2000:149) However, 'the more the better' does not apply to risk-taking in language learning. Beebe's research indicates that "persons with a high motivation to achieve are . . . moderate, not high, risk-takers". (Brown 2000:150) Students from high uncertainty avoidance cultures will typically not have the problem of being overzealous gamblers in risk-taking, but rather will rather lean towards being overly cautious.

4.1 Risk of evaluation

What risks, exactly, must language learners undertake? Brown (1994:160) lists some of the risks involved in language learning as "failing to produce intended meaning, failure to interpret intended meaning (on the part of someone else), of being laughed at, of being shunned or rejected." In other words, language learners risk social evaluation.

Fear of negative evaluation often prevents students from taking necessary risks. Specific examples mentioned by Beebe include "a bad grade in the course, a fail on the exam, a reproach from the teacher, a smirk from a classmate, punishment or embarrassment imposed by oneself." (Brown 2000:149).

One way to encourage risk-taking is to decrease the emphasis on evaluation. Responding with personal interest to what the student is saying does more to increase the likelihood that the student will want to have further exchanges than simply responding to the correctness of the student's utterance. To encourage risk-taking, Dufeu recommends that teachers "create a climate of acceptance that will stimulate

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self-confidence, and encourage participants to experiment and to discover the target language, allowing themselves to take risks without feeling embarrassed". (Brown 2000:150).

Along the same line, Stevick advises that by taking off the teacher mask, the teacher can create a more intimate atmosphere where students will feel more comfortable in speaking:

> "Yet I have seen a few teachers who are able to come out from behind this teacher mask, at least during "free conversation ". They have generally been among the best language teachers I have known. They escape the teacher mask through changes in voice, posture, and facial expression. Their nonverbal behavior is the same that they might use at home in the living room." (Doyon 2000)

In addition to fear of social evaluation, Beebe mentions two other risks faced by language learners: fear of alienation and loss of identity. (Brown 2000:149)

4.2 Risk of alienation and loss of identity

Language is intimately tied to one's self-image. Guiora calls the interplay between identity and the language through which it is both formed and confirmed the "language ego". In more simpler terms, one's native language and one's identity are closely linked. According to Guiora's theory, learning a foreign language poses a threat to one's language ego and as a result, defense mechanisms kick in which make language learning difficult. This explains why adults often feel foolish speaking a foreign language. (Brown 2000:65)

Stevick lists the various forms of alienation felt by language learners: "alienation between the critical me and the performing me, between my native culture and my target culture, between me and my teacher, and between me and my fellow students." (Brown 2000:149).

Japanese students are at a high risk for feelings of psychological and cultural alienation when speaking English, perhaps more so than students from Western

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cultures. Remnants of Japan's long period of isolationism remain in the Japanese psychology and can be seen in the strong distinction placed between Japanese and non-Japanese, as reflected in the Japanese language itself. One language example in particular is the use of "kokugo" for the language they learn, and "nihongo" for the language that foreigners learn. According to Ramsey and Birk, the reason behind these separate terms is "the belief that only the Japanese can truly learn Japanese", and conversely, that "some Japanese believe that they cannot learn foreign languages to the extent that others can." (Hinenoya & Gatbonton 2000:228).

4.3 Decreasing student inhibitions

It may well be impossible to eradicate inhibitions which are rooted deeply in a culture's collective psychology. However, to the extent that the teacher can "create a climate of acceptance" as Dufeu encourages, students will "feel comfortable as they take their first public steps in the strange world of foreign language." (Brown 2000:150).

Before acceptance can occur, teachers need to become aware of their students' beliefs regarding language learning, as well as the cultural bias in their own approach to language teaching. Nunan draws attention to the potential for conflict when he states:

> "The communicative approach, where students are required to put language to a range of uses, to use language which has been imperfectly mastered, to negotiate meaning, in short, to draw on their own resources rather than simply repeating and absorbing language. . . can sometimes cause problems if you are teaching learners who have rather set ideas on language and learning, particularly if these differ greatly from your own." (Nunan and Lamb 1996:136)

Once teachers are aware of which activities may be culturally challenging to their students' tolerance of uncertainty, teachers can lead students gradually toward activities which are perceived as risky. For example, before a high-risk task such as giving a presentation in front of the class, students can first be exposed to plenty of pair-work activities. Perhaps from here students can give presentations in smaller groups, working up to a whole-class presentation.

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Since interacting with the teacher involves higher risk than talking to a classmate, and since the students tend to consult anyway, it may be productive to encourage students to rehearse the answer to a question with a partner or group before calling upon individual students to respond. This incidentally also increases thinking time, and may encourage more complex answers than if the student feels put on the spot to give a quick reply. Lessons can be organized such that high-risk activities follow lower, confidence building activities. On a larger scale, the semester can be organized in such the same way, with a greater proportion of challenging activities occurring during the latter half of the semester.

4.4 Teachers as risk-takers.

A willingness to take risks is important not only for student success, but for teacher success as well. Brown explains that

> "The best teachers always take a few calculated risks in the classroom, trying new activities here and there. The inspiration for such innovation comes from the approach level, but the feedback they gather from actual implementation then informs their overall understanding of what learning and teaching is. Which, in turn, may give rise to a new insight and more innovative possibilities, and the cycle continues." (Brown 2000:201)

It is not always easy to know which activities students will take to readily, and which ones students will approach with caution. Teachers should not hold back from trying new activities because of uncertainty over whether it will be well received by the students. Rather, teachers should go ahead and experiment with new techniques, presenting them in a manner which is culturally sensitive, and afterward reflect upon the results. Whatever the outcome, the experience gained will result in a deeper understanding of how to teach students whose cultural background differs from our own.

5. Accuracy is valued.

In Japanese traditional arts, instruction usually takes the form of modeling. The goal is for the student to produce the teacher's exact model with no deviation. Any deviation is considered an error, even those that from a Western perspective might be

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termed an innovation. For example, in the martial arts there is great importance attached to learning “kata”, or correct form. This can extend into language learning, and as a result Japanese students tend to be overly concerned with making mistakes. (Gray and Leather 1999)

5.1 Insistence on accuracy in oral interaction.

Fear of making mistakes can be detrimental to the development of language fluency. This is often what is behind the long pauses which are characteristic of Japanese classroom speech as students spend too much time thinking about how to say it correctly rather than just saying it. Interaction can break down entirely if the speaker chooses to forego communication rather than risk making mistakes.

5.2 Teacher sensitivity in error correction

Doyon suggests that overt error correction can subconsciously inhibit students from speaking. He advises that “teachers should (a) wait until a certain level of trust has been established between themselves and the student, (b) wait until they feel the student can handle error correction, and (c) take less obtrusive routes in their forms of error correction.” (Doyon 2000) In other words, teachers must be sensitive to when and how they give feedback to students regarding errors.

5.3 Insistence on accuracy when listening

Insistence on accuracy is evident not only in speaking activities, but in listening activities as well. Students tend to become anxious when listening to native speakers if they don’t understand every word they hear, resulting in lower levels of listening comprehension. (Gray and Leather 1999:17). Presenting a listening text in a slower manner so as to increase the chance that students may understand more words is not really the best solution. Students need to learn how to understand spoken English as they would naturally encounter it ouside the classroom. Nunan recommends that the activity, rather than the text, be modified. “Difficulty can be eased”, he states, “by letting them hear the text as often as necessary and providing a range of activities of increasing complexity”. (Nunan 2000:27). This is also applicable in contexts where students may have a high level of anxiety towards listening tasks.

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5.4 Tolerance of ambiguity and learner success.

Language is a creative process, and learners need to feel free to experiment with language. Tolerance of ambiguity is the "degree to which you are cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions that run counter to your own belief system or structure of knowledge." (Brown 2000:119). Language is ripe with ambiguity. It is full of contradictory information, idioms, exceptions to grammatical rules, and in the case of a foreign language, there is the influence of a foreign culture as well.

Research suggests a relationship between high ambiguity tolerance in individuals and success in certain language tasks. Learners who are threatened by ambiguity may, due to a closed mind, lack the creativity that is essential to L2 learning. (Brown 2000:120). One of the characteristics of good language learners, as listed by Rubin and Thompson, is "learning to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word." (Brown 2000:123) So it is vital that we draw students' attention away from accuracy and encourage them to be more tolerant of ambiguity.

5.5 Encouraging tolerance of ambiguity.

In her research on learner achievement, Mori found that there was a negative correlation between avoidance of ambiguity and performance on achievement exams. She concluded that "those who accept multiple, ambiguous answers are more likely to better understand course materials than those who seek unambiguous, clear-cut answers." (Mori 1999:398) She proposes that teachers "carefully design or select instructional activities in such a way such that students will not get the impression that there is always a single, absolutely correct answer." (Mori 1999:408)

One practical way of realizing this is to encourage students to think of alternatives. For example, when presenting a conversation, students can be encouraged to create different versions. In testing, rather than relying exclusively on multiple-choice type tests, test questions based on personal experience or opinions can be included, since these type questions draw the student toward relying on their own resources and creativity.

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6. Implications for Language Teaching.

According to Gray and Leather, Japanese students "have specific needs which go largely unaddressed by the prevailing methodology in language schools and on college language courses. . . In particular, most material fails to bridge the culture gap or to address the specific problems that Japanese students encounter in trying to communicate spontaneously in the classroom. Japanese, and to a lesser extent other Asian learners, simply cannot be taught in the same way as students from predominantly Western cultures without significant underachievement." (Gray and Leather 1999:7)

The above viewpoint is not without controversy, and may indeed be an exaggeration of cross-cultural differences exacerbated when instructors fail to adapt their teaching materials to fit their students' interests, and/or fail to take into account their students' learning styles which are to some extent influenced by their culture. Teachers therefore need to examine whether their techniques and materials are culturally appropriate. Brown includes a checklist which teachers can use to gauge themselves along this line. He includes such items as "Does the technique recognize the value and belief systems that are presumed to be a part of the culture(s) of the students?" and "If the technique requires students to go beyond the comfort zone of uncertainty avoidance in their culture(s), does it do so empathetically and tactfully?" (Brown 2000:202)

6.1 Flexibility within the communicative approach.

The communicative approach, though it was mainly conceived in the Western teaching tradition, can be adapted to be culturally appropriate in other cultural contexts as well. In fact, one of the advantages of a communicative approach is that it is not a rigid method, but rather a flexible approach which allows for a variety of culturally appropriate techniques. This flexibility within the communicative approach is characteristic of the weak uncertainty avoidance culture from which it originated, and hence it plays to the cultural strengths of the Western instructor.

6.2 Negotiating methodology: An example of flexibility in action

Nunan brings up the idea of 'negotiating methodology' with students. He cites a case study of a teacher who was frustrated due to students were resisting the idea of pair

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and group work. The students had been accustomed to a passive teaching methodology and did not seem comfortable with activities which assigned a more active and independent role to students.

Rather than concluding that her students simply cannot be taught in a certain way, the teacher decided to survey her students regarding what activities they liked and which ones they would prefer to give up. The students gave a low rating to pair work and indicated that as the only activity they would prefer to discontinue. Rather than give up the idea of pair and group work, she explained her rationale for these activities, namely that it gives them more opportunities for practice, and that the discomfort they were feeling was a natural part of learning to communicate. Having been given a clear explanation, the students afterward became more positive and even enthusiastic about pair and group work. (Nunan 1996:143-144). In this example, the teacher's ability to adequately communicate with her students enabled her students to become more flexible towards their learning situation.

6.3 Awareness: a pre-requisite for flexibility.

Before teachers and students can adapt to each other's teaching/learning styles and expectations, they must develop awareness each other's cultural norms. For the teacher, time and experience in the culture will contribute towards cultural awareness. For the newly-arrived teacher, it is always helpful to network with other more culturally experienced teachers in your local area. In addition, rather than spending your time outside the classroom only with other non-Japanese, it would be beneficial to take advantage of opportunities whenever available to interact with Japanese people as well.

7. Conclusion

Uncertainty plays a vital role in the learning process. According to Jean Piaget, human beings "view incongruity, uncertainty, and 'disequilibrium' as motivating". (Brown, 2000:164) In other words, students need to feel somewhat challenged for learning to take place. As teachers, it is our responsibility to make sure that our students feel challenged rather than overwhelmed by the learning process.

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The dividing line between feeling challenged and feeling overwhelmed varies depending on students' cultural norms. It tends to be much lower for students from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures such as Japan. This exhibits itself in behaviors such as shyness, long pauses before speaking, and lack of fluency due to insistence on accuracy. Western teachers need to be sensitive to the underlying cultural influences behind these behaviors so that they can both adapt their techniques and adequately communicate their expectations in order to minimize cultural misunderstandings and maximize chances for learner success.

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APPENDIX

Ratings of fifty Countries and three Regions on Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension

(The larger the score, the stronger the preference for uncertainty avoidance)

Countries/Regions	Uncertainty Avoidance	Countries/Regions	Uncertainty Avoidance
Greece	193	Ecuador	6
Portugal	160	Germany	-2
Guatemala	148	Thailand	-6
Uruguay	143	Iran	-27
Belgium	119	Finland	-27
Salvador	119	Switzerland	-31
Japan	110	West Africa	-48
Yugoslavia	94	Netherlands	-52
Peru	89	East Africa	-56
France	85	Australia	-60
Chile	85	Norway	-64
Spain	85	South Africa	-68
Costa Rica	85	New Zealand	-68
Panama	85	Indonesia	-72
Argentina	85	Canada	-72
Turkey	81	USA	-81
South Korea	81	Philippines	-89
Mexico	69	India	-106
Israel	65	Malaysia	-122
Colombia	60	Great Britain	-126
Venezuela	44	Ireland	-126
Brazil	44	Hong Kong	-157
Italy	40	Sweden	-151
Pakistan	19	Denmark	-176
Austria	19	Jamaica	-218
Taiwan	15	Singapore	-239
Arab Countries	11		

(Hofstede 1991:13)

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