

The connection between culture and climate change

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1. Introduction

Climate change has long-since ceased to be a scientific curiosity and is no longer just one of many environmental and regulatory concerns. The United Nations Secretary General called it the “major overriding environmental issue of our time and the single greatest challenge facing environmental regulators”. Climate change will not only influence our economies, but also our health, safety, food production, security and other dimensions.

Climate change is a global matter. It might have different effects on several countries, but nevertheless the changing of our climate is a problem that will influence the whole World. Therefore, several countries will have to cooperate in the battle against climate change. A global problem needs a global solution.

To provide a solution, cross-cultural communication will be necessary. People from various countries, with various backgrounds, have to exchange their ideas and opinions about how to solve this problem. The cultural differences between these people influence both the content of their message as well as the way it's been expressed. (Shadid, 2007) The aim of this case study is to find out in what way the content of the message is influenced by the cultural differences of people. **Are the ideas about climate change and the policies from different governments influenced by the cultural specific elements of the various countries involved in the global debate about climate change?**

The study will compare Germany, the UK and the United States. The cultural specific elements of these countries will be defined using the theory of Hofstede (2005) and of Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner (1997) about cultural dimensions. The climate change policies of these countries will be connected to their culture to see if a connection between these two factors exists.

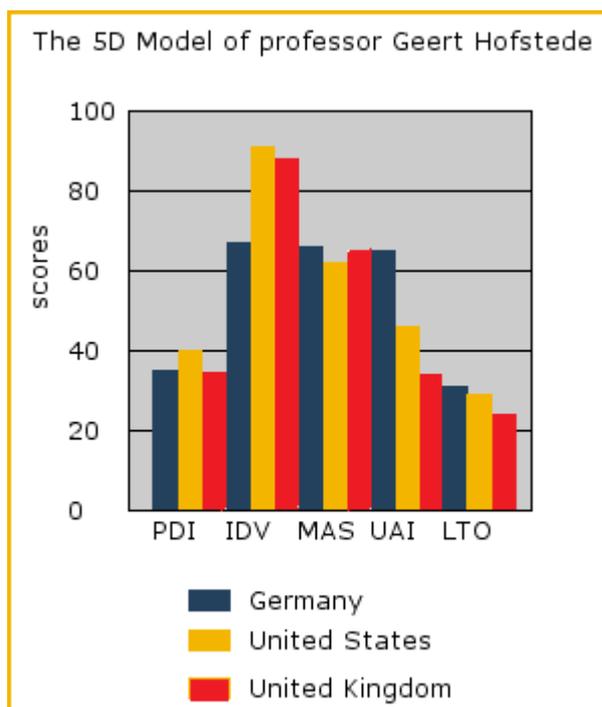
2. Culture

There are many definitions in literature to describe the term *culture*. There is no consensus about what exactly it is. In general, culture is described as a total of meanings or knowledge that human beings need to function in a certain situation: knowledge of language, habits, rituals, opinions, values and norms (Shadid, 2007). Both the products of a person as his functions are determined by the culture in which he or she was raised. Nevertheless people are, for the greater part, unaware of their culture. It determines how they feel, how they value the things around them and how they respond to them. However, they don't realize that these feelings are determined by their culture. The culture of a society is more or less transferred from generation to generation. Hofstede (1994) even speaks

about mental programming. He defines culture as the collective mental programming which separates members of one group from the other. Hofstede distinguishes five cultural dimensions, which are:

- Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV)
- Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS)
- Power Distance Index (PDI)
- Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)
- Long-Term Orientation versus Short-Term Orientation (LTO) (www.geert-hofstede.com).

The following table shows the scores on the five cultural dimensions of Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom. Outstanding scores are the scores of both the United States and the United Kingdom on Individualism. This shows that people from these countries are more individualistic than people from Germany. On the other hand, Germany has a high score on Uncertainty Avoidance Index, which means Germans in general take less risks and need more rules and guidelines than people from the States or the UK.



(www.geert-hofstede.com, 2010)

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) also developed a model of culture to compare countries' cultural dimensions. These seven dimensions are the following:

1. Universalism vs. particularism (*What is more important, rules or relationships?*)
2. Individualism vs. collectivism (*Do we function in a group or as individuals?*)

3. Neutral vs. emotional (*Do we display our emotions publicly?*)
4. Specific vs. diffuse (*How separate do we keep our private and working lives?*)
5. Achievement vs. ascription (*Do we have to prove ourselves to receive status or is it given to us?*)
6. Sequential vs. synchronic (*Do we do things one at a time or several things at once?*)
7. Internal vs. external control (*Do we control our environment or are we controlled by it?*)

The following table shows the scores of Germany, the UK and the US on the cultural dimensions of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). Some of the dimensions have more than one score, because the dimension contains several aspects. The scores are results of questions to respondents from the different countries.

	Germany	United Kingdom	United States
Universalism/Particularism	87/61	91/58	93/66
Individualism/Collectivism	53/62/36	51/70/48	69/72/54
Neutral/Emotional	35	45	43
Specific/Diffuse	83/75	88/82	82/85
Achievement/Ascription	40/74	56/89	75/87
Sequential/Synchronic	Sequential	Sequential	Sequential
Internal/External control	30/66	36/77	32/82

Looking at these numbers the three countries don't seem to have that many differences. Still, there are some characteristics that make that each country has his own specific culture. The United States for example, has been the world's biggest capitalist power for a long time – and still is. According to both Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) as Hofstede (2005), the USA is one of the most individualistic countries. Hand in hand with strong individualism, Americans believe that people can and must control their own destinies, which explains the high score on achievement. In general, the United States might be seen as the world's biggest capitalist power, Germany is undoubtedly the leader in Europe. Germany is a less individualistic country as the USA and the focus of Germans on achievement lies more on the achievement of groups than of individuals. The United Kingdom has

more cultural characteristics in common with the US than with Germany. The UK is - like the USA - an individualistic country. Status on the other hand, cannot only be received by achievement, but the British accept money as an acceptance of the individual, as well as corporate and social wealth, irrespective of whether or not anything is actually produced.

People's cultural backgrounds influence the way they communicate. Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey en Chua (1988) distinguish four different Communication styles and made a link between these Communication styles and the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1994). The communication styles of Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey en Chua (1988) are the following:

- Direct versus indirect
- Elaborate versus briefly
- Personal versus contextual
- Instrumental versus affective

The application of a certain communication styles, is affected by people's cultural background, or their cultural dimension. For example, the indirect form is namely used in collectivistic cultures like Japan and China. In these cultures people focus on not hurting the feelings of their communication partner. In individualistic countries, as the United States and the United Kingdom, it is more important that the sender of the message is certain that the message got received well, than that they think about the feelings of the receiver. For this reason the direct style is being used mostly in individualistic countries.

3. Climate Change

In the previous chapter it has been stated that the cultural background of people, which can be evaluated by the cultural dimensions of Hofstede and of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, influences the way people communicate. It is important to know if besides the influence of culture on the style of communication, it also influences the content of the message. J.M. Cohen (2000) says that scholars working within the field of comparative environmental policy regularly noted the disparity between the reactions of different countries to ecological threats. International climate change politics can therefore provide a clear example of how cultural differences, conflicts of interest and scientific assessments interact to shape environmental policy-making. (van der Wurff, 2009)

Although there are several climate change definitions available, one factor that they have in common is, obviously, the fact that there is a change in the climate. The term global warming often is been used as a synonym of climate change. Van der Wurff (2009) describes climate change as "a catch-all

phrase that refers to possible climatological consequences of increasing greenhouse gas emissions". The climatological changes that will occur because of the enhanced greenhouse effect can only be predicted in general terms. Predictions for specific regions of countries cannot yet be made and the social-economic and health effects of climate change are even more unclear. Then uncertainties about changes in regional climates are reinforced by the unpredictability of social-economic developments (Glantz, 1995). The potential effects of climate change are a lack of (clean) water, rising sea levels, global warming – an upward trend in global mean temperature – and a probable increase in the frequency of some extreme weather events (IPCC, 2007). To prevent these potentially costly social-economic and health effects governments can either aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (mitigation policies) or prepared for coming changes in climate (adaptation policies) (Klein, Schipper & Dessai, 2005). However, even when the policy choice is made, formulating and implementing these policies is complicated, due to the long and international character.

4. Climate Change Policy Negotiations

Climate change policymaking requires dealing with uncertainties, because numerous interests are involved and often affected in partly unknown ways. This is the reason for the widespread disagreement on how much and in what amount of time, emissions should be reduced and by whom. There have been major attempts to develop international climate change policies. In 1992, this led to the UNFCCC, the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change, in which emission stabilization targets for the period 1990-2000 for industrialized countries were included. In 1997, the first Kyoto Protocol was funded including emission reduction targets for the post-2000 period. The major distinction between the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention is that the Convention *encourages* industrialized countries to stabilize GHG emissions, but the Protocol *commits* them to do so (www.unfccc.int, 2010). The negotiations that led to the adoption of the UNFCCC and later the Kyoto Protocol are characterised by contradictions between both industrialised and developing countries as within the industrialised and developing countries. Within the group of industrialised countries, contradictions exist between the United States who favours flexible and cautious policies and Germany who supports the adoption of relatively exact targets for industrialised countries in particular. The position of the UK is in between the two extremes of the United States and Germany. Its formal domestic target was in line with US policies but its actual achievements are more in line with the German results. During the negotiations the UK played an important mediating role between Germany and the United States (van der Wurff, 2009).

Since industrialised countries still are the major emitters of greenhouse gas emissions, especially the conflicts within the this group of countries shape the outcome of climate change negotiations. The

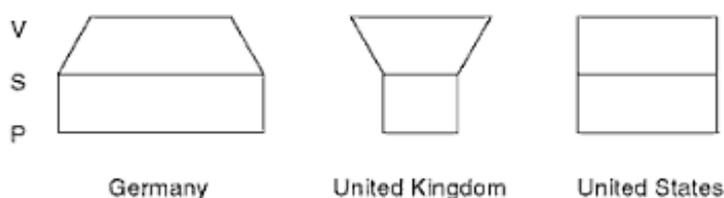
Kyoto Protocol also places a heavier burden on developed nations under the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”, since, due to more than 150 years of industrial activity, these countries are principally responsible for the current high levels of GHG emissions in the atmosphere (www.unfccc.int, 2010).

5. Climate Change Perceptions

The United States, the United Kingdom and Germany are important and influential players on the international stage in the context of climate change negotiations. From the start of the negotiations they have taken very different positions and favored different policies. One of the explanations of the discrepancy of policy preferences, is the interest-oriented explanation. According to Hindess (1993) ‘climate change interests are relative stable properties of individuals or collectivities which provide them with actual or potential reasons to support or oppose climate change policies.’ There are three categories of interests in the field of climate change:

- Polluter interests (welfare gains from continued pollution);
- Victim interests (welfare losses induced by pollution effects);
- Third-party or Support interests (the capacity to monitor, provide and use pollution-abatement technology) (Prittowitz, 1990).

Polluter interests provide actors reasons to oppose emission reductions because of the benefits they derive from the use of fossil fuels. Victim interests provide actors with reasons to support emission reduction because of the costs of climate change they have to bear. Third-party interests provide actors with reasons to support emission reductions, because of the benefits they derive from climate change mitigation measures. As a consequence, countries with dominant polluter interests are expected to behave as draggers in international environmental negotiations, whereas victim countries are expected to push for stringent international environmental agreements. Under most circumstances, third-party interests will favor pusher rather than dragger interests. The combination of these three aspects is supposed to account for the aggregate national position in international negotiations (van der Wulf, 2009). Von Prittowitz (1990:124) compared the interests of Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. The following table shows the results from this comparison:



Legend: horizontal lines represent interests

V: victim interests ——— strong interests
 S: support interests ——— medium interests
 P: polluter interests ——— weak interests

To summarize, Germany has a strong polluter and supporter interest with lower victim interest. The UK has a similar victim interest but other values are much lower. Interests in the US are almost equally divided over the three categories.

6. World View and Policy Perceptions

In the previous chapters, we have seen that Germany, the UK and the United States have different world views. The scores of the three countries on the cultural dimensions of Hofstede and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars range widely. Additionally, the interests of the three countries on the climate change matter are very different as well.

Van der Wurff (2008) has made a connection between the cultural characteristics and the policy position of Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. This table shows clearly how the different policies are influenced by the culture of the country.

	Germany	United Kingdom	United States
Basic cultural characteristics	<i>Zielrationalismus</i> ; rule-making; 'deep' thinking; technological orientation; aversion of risk	Individualistic and analytic; money instead of industry; principle against principle	Universalist-analytical; codification, basics and facts; focus on present; international and isolationist outlook
...related to specific... conceptualization of nature	nature as a global unity; unstable; <i>Wald</i>	nature as local, divisible entity; environment as peripheral issue; <i>countryside</i>	anthropocentric orientation (utility and aesthetics); focus on species and natural parks; <i>wilderness</i>
...that underlies... national type of environmental awareness	'principled'; threat and challenge; global orientation; technological change	scientific-sceptical; local nature; willingness to pay; individual freedom	religious-anthropocentric; political; S&T 'as usual'
...that in turn presents... Climate change as...	global; ecological challenge; overarching	cost; uncertain; energy issue	political issue; not too threatening
...which results in the following... policy position	targets; structural approach; technological innovation	meeting international commitments; energy market liberalisation policies	soft 'targets'; joint Implementation; voluntary approach; cost-benefit analysis

(van der Wurff, 2008: 468)

We can see that the high score of Germany on uncertainty avoidance leads to the fact that they prefer a ruled-based, structural approach to creating a climate change policy. The United Kingdom, as an individualistic country, underlines individual freedom. Their policy position is to meet international commitments. The US also is an individualistic country which focuses on the present.. Therefore, a changing climate is not perceived as a great threat. For this reason, they tend so set soft targets and have a voluntary approach on climate change policy.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this case study was to find out in what way the climate change policy of a nation is dictated by its culture. The topic-question is the following:

Are the ideas about climate change and the policies from different governments influenced by the cultural specific elements of the various countries involved in the global debate about climate change?

To answer this question, the cultural elements of Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States have been compared to their policies on climate change. These three countries have played an important role in climate change negotiations from the start. To define the culture specific elements of the nations, the theories of Hofstede and Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner are used. Distinctions between the cultural dimensions are that both the United Kingdom and the United States are individualistic countries, while Germany is a more collectivistic country. Germany also has a high uncertainty avoidance index, which means that the society prefers rules and guidelines. Another aspect in which the countries differ from another is how status is attained. In the United States, status can only be attained by achievement. In the United Kingdom where you come from is often more important than what you have done in your life.

Germany is a more collectivistic country. For this reason, status can be achieved by groups more than by individuals. The three countries also have different perceptions on the climate change matter, comparing results from the countries on three categories of interest, namely: polluter interest, supporter interest and victim interest. Germany has a strong interest for both the polluters as the supporters, whereas in the UK the focus of interest lies on the victims. In the United States, the interest is spread evenly over the three categories. In the last chapter, the cultural specific elements of the countries are brought in connection to their policy on climate change. This showed that culture can indeed be a predictor for the policy on climate change of a country. Coming to this conclusion, it is important to see what this actually means for climate change negotiations. When culture influences the policy of a country, it could be useful for the different countries to have knowledge about other countries' cultural dimensions, because they can explain the rationale for the policy change. This could lead to mutual understanding and more fruitful negotiations.

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