The Role of Culture in Libyan Public and Private Organisations

Salh Bezweek¹ and Charles Egbu¹

¹Research Institute for the Built and Human Environment, University of Salford, Salford, M5 4WT, United Kingdom

Email: S.A.Bezweek@pgr.ac.uk; C.O.Egbu@salford.ac.uk

Abstract:
A critical review of available literature is presented, which relates to the impact of culture on communication behaviour in public and private organisations. This is in order to identify deficiencies in the area of study as well as to draw some lessons for future research. The focus is primarily on the effect of culture values on communication in Libyan public and private organisations. Key issues associated with definitions of culture, communication behaviours and organisational culture are considered and discussed. In addition, a critical review and synthesis of related studies on the effect of local Libyan cultural values on the communication behaviour of individuals in organisations are addressed. In conclusion, the paper argues that the role of culture in communication behaviour in organisational settings is complex. The paper also points to the fact that Libyan culture reflects ‘high power distance’, ‘masculinity’ and uncertainty avoidance. The implications of these complex issues to research strategy and design are also documented together with recommendations for researchers.

Keywords:
Culture, Libyan local culture, Communication behaviour, public and private organisations

1 Introduction

The theoretical and intuitive field of cultural studies has developed over the past three decades, during which time various problems, issues and debates have emerged from within the literature. Thus, this review considers the influence of Libyan culture on the communication behaviour of individuals in Libyan organisations. In this paper recent cultural studies are examined in order to investigate the impact of societal culture on communication among staff in Libyan public and private organisations and to provide suggestions for future research on this issue. It also analyses the extent to which power distance, masculinity, collectivism and uncertainty avoidance affect the communication behaviour of individuals in terms of harmony and organisational hierarchy structure in Libyan organisations. This paper draws on and ongoing doctoral studies in the area of ¹. This paper, however, is primarily based on a thorough and critical review of literature. It documents and discusses key issues drawn from related literature and areas
communication behaviour, culture organisational dynamics and power influences in public and private organisations in Libya. Academic journals, conference proceedings, text books and websites are the main sources of information.

2 Methodology

This paper draws on and ongoing doctoral studies in the area of improvement quality of communication in Libyan planning organisations. This paper, however, is primarily based on a thorough and critical review of literature. It documents and discusses key issues drawn from related literature and areas communication behaviour, culture organisational dynamics and power influences in public and private organisations in Libya. Academic journals, conference proceedings, text books and websites are the main sources of information.

3 Definition of culture

Culture is strongly connected with communication and is defined in many ways. Martin et al., (2004, p. 337) have defined culture as “learned patterns of behaviour and attitudes shared by groups of people”. Moreover, the American Psychological Association (2002) defined culture as “The belief system and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices and social institutions including psychological processes (language, care taking practice, media and educational systems) and organisations (media educational system)”. Thus, culture at the societal level is manifested in values and less in practice. However, culture at the organisation level is more likely to be manifested in practice and less in values (Hofstede, 1997). Therefore, culture can be defined as the shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.

4 Organisational culture

Organisational culture has been studied from a variety of perspectives, ranging from disciplines such as sociology and anthropology and social psychology. A definition of culture developed in each of these disciplines was provided by the cultural geographer Haggett (1975, p. 238): Culture describes patterns of behaviour that form a durable template by which ideas and images can be transferred from one generation to another, or from one group to another. Every organisation has a different culture. Organisational culture tends to include the beliefs, values, norms and patterns of action that characterise social relationships and are reflected in the structures and processes within an organisation (Schein, 1988; Hyde and Williamson 2000).

In the literature the definitions of organisational culture is diverse. Among these definitions, the definition of Hyde and Williamson (2000) is widely quoted, which defined organisational culture as, “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the organisation asserts are important as guides to the way people should behave to solve its problems of external adaptation and internal integration to achieve its goals and
objectives”. Thus, as noted previously, culture at the societal level is manifest in values and less in practice. However at the organisational level it is more likely to be in practice and less in values (Hofstede, 1997).

Therefore, many studies and training programmes which are now available include courses in cultural communication, which contains models of culture and cross-cultural communication skills (Graft, 2004). Each organisation has its own cultural patterns, organizations’ culture stems from "the shared beliefs and values that influence the behaviour of organizational members" (Schermherhorn, et al., 2005, P.9). Communication aims to achieve these goals and objectives in organisations. Moreover, communication allows members of the organisation to exchange information to achieve their tasks (Lee, 2005). Thus, employees in organisations work between two systems of values; their cultural background value system and the organisational value system, both of which usually share the same values but to achieve different objectives. Organisational culture affects the way in which people consciously and subconsciously think, make decisions and ultimately the way in which they perceive, feel and act (Schein, 1990). For example, loyalty to a group is an important cultural value in Libyan society; on the other hand, loyalty to the organisation is also an important value in organisational culture (Abubaker, A. 2007).

Such value will affect the communication behaviours of individuals in the organisation (Hyde and Williamson, 2000). Due to national cultural influences, Twati and Gammack (2004) consider organisational culture in Libya as a strong culture, which resists organisational change in many ways, including the decision making process, communication, employment, professionalism and other aspects.

### 5 Communication behaviour

In the literature there are many definitions for organisational behaviour. Gibson, et al (2000, P.5) described organisational behaviour as follows: “The field of study that draws on theory, methods and principles from various disciplines to learn about individual perspectives, values, learning capacities and actions while working in groups and within the total organisation; analysing the external environments effect on the organisation and it’s human resources, mission, objectives and strategies”. Also, Daft and Noe (2001, P.4) defined organisational behaviour as: "The actions and interactions of individuals and groups in organisations".

Communication is widely studied as a means of transmitting ideas as part of culture (Jandt, 2004). Communication can be divided into three types: verbal (use of words with specific meaning), paraverbal (tone of the voice), and non-verbal communication. Nonverbal communication can be defined as communication without words while verbal communication is defined as communication with words (Remland, 2004). It has also various components, such as encoding, message, channel, receiver, decoding and receiver response in achieving success in communication. Therefore, communication behaviour is divided into verbal and non-verbal.
5.1 Verbal communication

Communication and culture are strongly related to each other. Thus, the study of communication in Western culture has a recorded history of some 2,500 years begun in Greece with Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics, and which described the process of communication as involving a speaker, the speech act, an audience, and a purpose (Jandt, 2004). The basis of communication is the interaction between people. Verbal communication is one way for people to communicate face-to-face. Some of the key components of verbal communication are sound, words, speaking, and language. In spite of the fact that the main element of communication is language, and all languages are similar in linguistic structure, they may express different cultural aspects (Fisher, 1978). According to Wary and Grace (2007) the cultural diversity plays an important role in misunderstanding in exoteric communication. This concludes that each culture seems to have its own characteristics, which lead to various studies and approach to communication. The understanding of the hearer is the responsibility of speaker, who must take further steps to clarify his message. Therefore, the understanding of the cultural background of the listener and clarify the message has an important role in facilitating communication (Jandt, 2004).

5.2 Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication is a very important carrier of information. It includes facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, emotions, attitudes, and feelings shown in different gestures, and body language (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). Its role is highly significant and essential in social interactions. One of the most important non-verbal signals in social interactions is eye contact. Eye gaze is defined by Argyle (1988) as “the meeting of two peoples gaze or their looking into each others eyes”. Furthermore, Argyle (1988) suggests that ‘People look more at those they like’. On the contrary reduction of gaze is often a sign of disapproval, a lack of control, ignorance, or a lowered level of intimacy, depending on the interactions context. The facial expression is an affect display; it shows the emotional state of the individuals. It is significant that an inappropriate facial expression my well block effective communication. For example, in Libya culture most people unintentionally use facial expression to express fear, sadness, happiness and surprise (Twatti, 2006). These facial expressions are less likely to be understand by another people from different cultural background. (Samover and Porter, 2004). The face saving strategy is one of the main approaches in Libyan communication. This may be due to Libyan society structure, because in Libyan organisations, employees care about the reputation of their names, families and tribes. Therefore, societal reputation is a very important element for societal relationship in Libyan society (Twatti, 2006).

6 Public and Private Organisations

According to Senior (McNamara, 2001), an organisation is a group of people working together to achieve the same goal. In the beginning, organisational studies concentrated on moral bases of management, leadership and dynamism of bureaucracy. In the second half of the last century there were different studies about organisational structures, activities and relationships between organisation and their communities (Boden, 1994). In traditional political science literature it is emphasised that there are distinct
differences between private and public organisations (Lane, 1993). Most public organisations do not have the same strategic freedom that private organisations have since some of their strategic goals are decided by politicians. This puts constraints on public organisations’ ability to operate and may in some instances force public organisations to make decisions that are not sound for society at large (Lane, 1993). This also affects the resources available to public organisations. They do not always have the resources needed in order to meet demands, making it necessary for public organisations to prioritise which customer/user to serve. This is a situation unfamiliar to private organisations (Eskildsen, j. k. et al., 2004).

A further feature of traditional public organisations is that they are subject to political rather than market controls. External controls on private organisations are market controls such as competition, consumer constraints and shareholders interests. Instead, public organisations have traditionally been constrained by political authority and political activities. Their objectives, structures, and processes have often been defined by central bureaucracy agencies or constrained by legislation (Cole, 1988).

In Libya, communist public organisational systems are adopted in many sectors, such as business, education, health, and media in addition to other social and political organisations. Due to globalisation, organisations in Libya have adopted western models without considering their local cultural values. This leads to conflict between organisational values and national values (Al-hamadi et al., 2007). The allure of globalisation has affected most of Libyan organisations (public and private). It has also created a huge debate about organisational values and the methods of dealing with social issues in Libyan organisations. In the early 1970s there were few women who went to study in schools or to work in organisations. However, nowadays women are more than men in schools and especially in the areas of humanity and social public services. This is due to availability of education and to cultural changes (Twatti, 2006).

7 Libyan Culture – Key Concepts and Values

Libyan culture involves a closely interwoven network of relationships that takes time to establish and maintain. The concept of “wasta”, roughly translated as “influence”, is a direct consequence of these personal relationships together with family ties, trust and honour. In Libya, this relates to the importance of having personal contacts in influential places so rules can be bent or things done more quickly. As a system based on the reciprocation of favours, “wasta” permeates all aspects of Libyan society and is particularly prominent in business settings. “Face”, the values of social status, respect, and personal dignity where protecting the honour of one’s family and the collective good is paramount to Libyans. “Face”, although often associated with countries in the Far East, also plays a significant role in Libyan culture (Communicaid Group Ltd, 2007). Therefore, all business dealings in Libya are based on reputation and rely on the development of trust.

Libya is an Arab country and shares common cultural values, language, religion and other social values with the Arab countries. In Libya the official language is Arabic and the dominant religion is Islam. This religion has a serious role in shaping Libyan cultural values (Vandewalle, 2006). The great majority of Libyans follow the Sunni
branch of Islam and the traditions of Muslim society. Today, Libyans are, in general, conservative without being fundamentalist in their approach to religion. However, as a Muslim state, the heritage of Islam is deeply rooted in the character of the Libyan people and for most it is an integral part of their daily life. Islamic rule pervades Libyan customs and culture, providing the framework for the behaviour of individuals in both social and business contexts. Therefore, care must be taken to respect this, particularly in the area of dress, language and behaviour (Communicaid Group Ltd, 2007).

This led many authors to generalise their cultural studies on all of the Arab countries, which leads to generalisation in cultural studies and about Libyan culture in particular. In Libyan society, Islam is considered a comprehensive religion covering social and political aspects as well as piety of soul and normal principles of people’s behaviour (Twati, 2006). According to Ali (1988), hard work is seen as virtue, and those who work hard are more likely to get ahead in life, and get the respect of people in the place of work. Therefore, in Libyan organisations social relations at work are also encouraged. Thus, it is important to have good relationships with your colleagues and leaders, because links inside and outside work can be vital elements in achieving successful communication among staff (Yousef, 2000). The idea of a common humanity is a central belief in Islamic religion. Thus, it is mentioned in the Koran that God created people from different tribes and nations to know and appreciate each other. Consequently, Muslims know that they must embrace and respect even those who may be not belong to their community, religion, or nation (Akbar, 2003). This supports the views of Leat and El-kot (2007), who argued that harmony and the maintenance of social relationships are very important characteristics of Arabic culture. Hence, respect, establishing and maintaining relationships with strangers are strongly recommended in Arabic culture. Therefore, due to Islamic culture, Libyan society which consists of different tribes and families have strong social relationships ties (Twati, 2006).

In the literature, studies on culture and national cultures have an important role in forming the characteristics of society’s members from an early age. Furthermore, the existence and stability of national culture values over long periods is due to their transfer from one generation to another (Hofstede, 2001), so we cannot get rid of them easily. In addition, these values are considered as a type of belief concerned with what is good or desirable. They also motivate behaviour and guide evaluations and decisions (Hyde and Williamson, 2000). Thus, individuals are expected to act according to these values. Additionally, Ali (1986-87) argued that Islam is one of the most influential factors which have shaped current Arab value systems. Consequently, it is more likely that those who believe in Islam and practice it tend to be more committed to their organisations and more satisfied with their jobs.

Therefore, Islamic religion affected Libyan culture, the communication behaviour of employees and the organisational culture in Libyan society.

8 Libyan Culture and Hofstede’s Dimensions

Hofstede (1980) conceived culture as a construct which manifests itself in an organisation as a result of the organisation’s location within a particular society. On the basis of an extensive analysis of 88,000 responses to a questionnaire survey of IBM
employees in 66 countries, Hofstede argued that there are four discrete dimensions of culture: Individualism versus collectivism. Uncertainty avoidance. Power distance. Masculinity versus feminism.

The IBM study is considered to be one of the most important study on the relation between Libyan cultural values and organisation culture in Libyan organisations. The influence of Libyan culture can be seen in the findings of Hofstede in the IBM study. Hofstede’s research shows how national culture affects the values of the organisation in a society. The study examined the attitudes held by employees in IBM branches, in three regions and fifty countries which Libya was one. According to this study, Libyan culture is characterised by high power distance, high masculinity, high uncertainty avoidance and low individualism. According to Hofstede, all these factors have contributed negatively to the communication among staff in the decision making process. He argues that most of the appointed managers in this region held high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, which affect decision and communication in Libyan organisations. This supports the view of Leat and El-kot (2007), who argue that the findings of Hofstede (1980) complement the Islamic work ethic and other Islamic values. Also, Hofstede’s findings are in agreement with the study of Twati (2006). In his study, he found that Libyan culture still has strong power distance, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance as what Hofstede indicated in his IBM findings.

9 Critiques of Hofstede’s work

As in the case of many studies of culture, Hofstede’s work has various weaknesses. First of all, as Leat and El-kot (2007) claim, Hofstede generalised his result in some cases, such as all Arab countries. Moreover, Hofstede considered the attitudes of his samples as the main elements in judging their cultures. However, many cultures have diverse and wide range of culture groups, including dominant and subordinate social groups, as is the case in many of the countries where the study was conducted (Mead, 1998). Moreover, Hofstede studied only one computer industry, and single multinational company IBM. In many of the countries examined, the values of employees typically represent only a small group, who are educated, middle class and live in cities (Mead, 1998). Furthermore, the study of Hofstede faced various technical problems in terms of the changing attitudes of the participants. For instance, in large power distance cultures, powerful people may pretend to be less powerful than they are. In addition, in masculinity cultures men are supposed to be ambitious and tough, but they appeared to be more understanding and accepting of the role of women in the organisation (Hofstede, 1997). Another criticism of Hofstede’s work is oversimplifying both concepts of individualism and collectivism (Schepf, 2006). Finally, in terms of historical development, Hofstede (2001) considers that cultural change over time is an essential element which might invalidate scores on the indexes in the national cultural context.

10 Libyan Culture and Communication in Organisations

Libyan culture is considered to be a traditional culture, and Libyan society consists of large tribes and extended families which might be due to the strong influence of the religion of Islam. According to Hall (1969), Libyan culture is considered a contact
culture, where people from the same sex can stand and walk side by side near each other. However, in communication between different genders it seems to be a strict culture. Therefore, in terms of communication between individuals in organisations, there are some issues that should be considered in communication behaviours. For example, eye contact and the use of personal space are very sensitive issues, and easily cause embarrassment in Libyan culture, especially between males and females (Samovar and Porter). In Islamic culture it is not allowed to close office door when talking to a colleague of opposite sex. We can argue that in this culture many cultural values are based on religion, leading to gender differences in communication, behaviour and social structure (Hofstede, 2003).

According to Ali (1988), Muslims believe that God is the greatest being. He created them and arranged all their life affairs. Moreover, Muslims believe that the future is best left to God. Therefore in doing their businesses, Muslims believe that they have to do their best and then success or failure is arranged by God (Akbar, 2003). This leads Leat and El-Kot (2007) to argue that individuals in Arabic culture consider hard work and keeping themselves busy as part of worshipping God and the way to relinquish sins, which is understood by Hofstede as part of uncertainty avoidance. According to Jandt (2004), in Arabic culture the religious expression “inshallah” means “if God wishes”. This phrase is very common and used informally. Therefore, one should not think that you will be ignored if you ask someone to do something and he says “inshallah”, especially when he says it twice, which means “yes” in Libyan culture. Communication in the place of work, as well as the social relations are important (Leat and El-Kot, 2007). Moreover, in the social atmosphere, harmony and maintaining relationships are the main characteristics of Arabic culture (Jackson, 2002). Therefore, cooperation for many individuals in this culture is a vital element in coexisting with others in society and in organisations (Hanky, 2004).

11 Cultural Values and Organisational Hierarchy

Nydell (1996) argue that, in Libya as in other Arab countries, organisations have faced various pressures from developed countries which have affected cultural values and how people behave in their workplace. In particular, the use of western technologies and approaches to work has necessitated the adoption of western values and social policies according to international standards. In terms of communication behaviour, people in higher distance cultures do care about face in work strategies when they express themselves and clarify their attitudes (Westwood et al, 1992). Therefore, in relation to facial expressions, in such cultures face in work communication strategies will be adopted according to the nature of the message. For instance, in delivering a negative message the sender uses an indirect communication style whereas direct face work strategies are used in delivering positive messages (Merkin, 2006).

In verbal communication in high context culture, as in the Libyan culture, people usually use fewer words in delivering messages, which is opposite in low context culture such as in America (Hofstede, 1997). Moreover, in Libyan society, large power distance cultures, formal and respectful behaviours are important in the organisational hierarchy to show differences between the leaders and other members. For instance, members of staff usually use formal title when they communicate with their leaders,
such as Mr, Dr, and Madam (Hofstede, 2001). This may be due to social tradition which encourages respect and obedience to parents and elderly people (Abouhidba, 2005). Therefore, an understanding of the national culture has a serious influence on how managers and employees communicate to make decisions and interpret their roles (Hanky, 2004).

In large power distance cultures, showing respect and obedience are very common among individuals. This may be because they do not value their own participation in decision making processes (Lee, 2005). Individuals accept unequal distribution of power in organisations and in society. This may lead to the use of powerful and formal language in organisational communication (Hofstede, 1997). Therefore, Peter (2007) argued that participation in the setting of goals and the decision making process are strongly dependent on communication and the relationship between employees and their leaders. However, due to cultural characteristics, managers in Libyan organisations consider the acceptance of advice, opinion or feedback from their subordinates as a negative sign to their way of running organisations. Therefore, in this society the feedback of qualified subordinates to advice or update their superiors is prohibited (Twati & Gammack, 2007). Consequently, this leads to central management and a central decision making process in Libyan organisations. In Libyan organisations, delegation is rare. Generally speaking, there is one owner or person in authority who is responsible for all those involved in the business and held responsible for all key decision-making. Personal relationships built on trust form the basis of all business practice in Libya.

12 Cultural Values and Harmony in Organisations

Gabb (2006) concluded that the cultural paradigm places people in the context of their cultural origins, which includes social, historical, psychological, political, knowledge, experience and other social factors. She argued that individuals in collectivist cultures tend to be more concerned about the importance of being members of a cohesive group. This may be to protect themselves socially in their peer groups in return for their loyalty and conformist social behaviour. On the other hand, this assumption is not encouraged by an individualistic culture that rewards individuals for their initiative and the risks they take to emphasise authority and express their theories and opinions (Hofstede, 2003). Therefore, in Libyan culture, as is the case in collectivist culture, it is really difficult for the staff to work according to organisational culture without being influenced by their cultural background. In other words, friendship and other social relationships have an influence on fulfilling tasks in Libyan organisations.

According to the Islamic religion, women are granted the ability to gain an education and to work. However, for political and social reasons, in the Islamic world and in Arabic countries in particular, women still have limited participation in leading public and private organisations (Donno and Russett, 2004). Thus, gender does have an influence on the communication behaviour of individuals in different social setting (Merkin, 2005). Johnson, et al. (2005) agreed with Burleson (2003), who found that women in employment were more concerned with establishing and maintaining good relationships and improving the work with their leaders. However, men usually do extra work in developing and maintaining their work relationships. This leads to the argument
that the religion of Islam has played an essential role in creating the cultural values of individuals in Libyan society. In Islamic culture, faith, ethics and social practices are strongly connected. Thus, Muslims usually consider Islam as their way of life (Abouhidba, 2005). Therefore, Dabbous-sensinig (2006) report that different aspects of the religion of Islam indicate how women should behave and dress within their homes and in workplace. This social structure and cultural background affects the relationship and communication within Libyan schools, universities, and organisations in terms of treatment towards one another and performance.

In general, the application of religion to social relations has a crucial role in increasing power distance, collectivism and masculinity in Libyan culture (Twati, 2006). For instance, obedience to parents and elderly people is strongly recommended in the Koran, being considered as a part of worshipping God, whereby believers will be rewarded (Abouhidba, 2005). This leads to a direct relationship between the organisational hierarchy and social culture in Libyan organisations (Twati & Gammack, 2007). Moreover, it is widely known that conforming behaviours and cooperation are strongly related to collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). This can also be seen in Libyan organisations, where managers care about their subordinates in different emotional and psychological situations (Twati & Gammack, 2004). These cultural dimensions strongly affect the communication behaviour of individuals in Libyan organisations, in addition to the social and organisational hierarchy structure in Libyan society.

13 Conclusion

From the literature review of the cultural studies, it can be concluded that Libyan culture is characterised by high power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance and low individualism. In this review, most of the studies cited here considered Arabic culture as a single culture. This may be because the Arab countries share certain common characteristics such as language, religion, customs, and other social features. In future research, the concept of Arabic culture should not be generalized to all Arabic societies, for several reasons. Firstly, Arab countries located in two different continents may have different political systems. Moreover, these countries have been occupied by various nations with different cultural background. Therefore, Arab countries need to be studied individually in a sort of case study.

In conclusion, Libya as a case has not been sufficiently researched, therefore, there is a necessity for more empirical studies to investigate cultural issues within the Libyan context. Research in the future should investigate the effect of organisational culture and leadership style on job satisfaction and organisational commitment and to examine to what extent organisational strategies aim to achieve matching between organisational values and national cultural values in order to encourage organisational change in terms of communication change among individuals in ruling organisations.

14 References

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