



Conversations with the Experts

Cross-Cultural Research in Work-Family



Zeynep Aycan

Bio: Zeynep Aycan is an Associate Professor of Industrial and Organizational Psychology at Koç University. Trained as a cross-cultural psychologist, Aycan's research focuses on the impact of culture on various aspects of organizational processes, including leadership, human resource management, women's career development, and work-life balance.

She has published five books: *Expatriate Management: Theory and Research* (Ed.; JAI Press, 1997), *Leadership, Management, Human Resource Practices in Turkey* (Ed.; Turkish Psychological Association, 2000); *Frontiers of Cross-Cultural Organizational Behavior* (with Michele Gelfand & Miriam Erez; Sage Inc, forthcoming); *Life Balance* (with Mehmet Eskin & Serap Yavuz; Sistem Press; 2007); *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Organizational Behavior* (with Rabindra N. Kanungo and Manuel Mendonca; Sage Inc., forthcoming) and fifty book chapters and research articles in journals including *Annual Review of Psychology*, *Group and Organization Management*, *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, and *International Journal of Human Resource Management*.

She is the co-founder and the co-Editor (with Terence Jackson) of the *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management* (Sage Publishing).

Aycan is the President of the International Society for the Study of Work and Organizational Values (ISSWOV). She has been invited as a research fellow and guest lecturer to Aston Business School, UK; European School of Management, Oxford; Bordeaux School of Management, France, and Tartu School of Economics, Estonia. Aycan served as a consultant or trainer to companies including Bechtel-Enka, Phillip-Morris, Migros, Alcatel, Efes, Pfizer, and GlaxoSmithKlein. She is the recipient of two awards (Recognition Award and Outstanding Young Scholar award) from the Turkish Academy of Sciences for her contributions to management sciences at the national and international levels. She was also nominated for the Caroline Dexter's best paper award at the 2004 Academy of Management Meeting for her paper (co-authored with Mehmet Eskin) on the role of social support in work-family conflict.

Aycan is married with a son.

An Interview with Zeynep Aycan

By Suzan Lewis and Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya

Lewis: You're actually measuring values as well as other aspects of culture and you attribute any differences to culture. Why is that important?

Aycan: There are many multinational organizations that employ people from different cultural backgrounds. In order to manage employees' well-being as well as motivation, we need to understand what kind of values and expectations they have regarding work and family. Performance or achievement is not the most important value in many parts of the world. For instance, if you promote someone to a managerial position, you need to consider that maybe it will be perceived negatively by that person, because it means that they compromise their family. Therefore, the person may be demotivated, resent it, and may not accept it. In order to manage a diverse workforce effectively, we need to know what is important to people. What are their values? What is the role of the family?

Lewis: You are a cross-cultural psychologist directing a multi-nation project on work-family conflict (WFC) in Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Spain, Turkey, Australia, Canada, the United States, and Israel. Can you tell me first what cross-cultural WFC research is and how it differs from international WFC research?

Aycan: Cross-cultural research is a type of research within the international research tradition. The main difference is in cross-cultural research, the focus is on the influence of culture on the observed phenomenon; in this case, WFC. In other words, culture, usually defined as prevailing values, norms, and belief systems, is measured in cross-cultural research. It is not taken for granted, or it is measured and correlated with the phenomenon that you are studying. In international research, you compare countries without necessarily measuring the cultural values, and the unit of analysis is country. In cross-cultural research, we can talk about organizational culture and regional culture, so different levels can be examined. In international research, you take a more general viewpoint and any difference (for example, socio-political environment or labor laws) can influence your findings. In cross-cultural research, the differences are specifically attributed to culture.

Lewis: Yes, I can see how this is important. Can you tell us a little about your project and how it came about?

Aycan: The research started six years ago. I was slightly disturbed by the way people would say “can you please collect data for me from X country, Y country?” This is not the way that cross-cultural research should be conducted. At the time, I was conducting research in Turkey on WFC. I wanted to contribute to the literature about the role of culture in WFC and to investigate the outcomes of cross-cultural research when researchers from diverse cultures participate equally in the research process. The process is very carefully crafted. We wanted to see if the Western model from Frone, Yardley, and Markel (1997) still applied with the important additional element of culture. Culture in our model has both a direct effect as well as a moderating effect. For instance, one element of the culture is the monochronic (doing tasks one at a time and starting a new task when others are completed) and polychronic (multi-tasking) time orientation; we added that measure to our survey. If people are polychronic, they’re less likely to experience WFC compared to people who are monochronic. Coping is another example; coping style can also differ across cultures.

Lewis: Do you think the notion of WFC itself, which started in the West and the United States in particular, is necessarily relevant across different cultures?

Aycan: I think WFC is an issue that transcends cultures in modern life. As societies become more industrialized and work and home are separated, WFC is inevitably an issue. We are trying to find out if there are differences in the prevalence, strength or causes of conflict. That’s where culture plays a role in this process.

Lewis: Do you think it’s acceptable to use WFC scales that are validated in the United States and apply them elsewhere?

Aycan: It took our projects nearly two years to adapt the measures. We first conducted focus groups sessions without having any framework in mind whatsoever; we just asked people in our respective countries about their experiences. First of all, we wanted to see whether we were missing anything across cultures if we used Western-developed models. Once we established that this can be a workable model, we then went into the predominantly Western literature to operationalize these latent constructs. For instance, all of the native researchers in their respective cultures used local measures of areas such as work involvement or social support. We came together, discussed the variables in-depth, and examined their relevance to our respective societies. For instance, for the support measure, we had to add new items such as support from neighbours or support from children themselves that some families receive (i.e., children looking after one another when parents go to work.) This way, we added more dimensions to the measures. In some countries, we had to remove some items because they were either offensive or totally irrelevant. For instance, in the gender role ideology measure, one item was “when women marry, they have to change their style of dressing to be more conservative.” We found that in Australia and Canada, that one item was very offensive. People refused to answer those kinds of questions, especially women, so we had to either tone down such items or eliminate them. It took us two years to pilot our measures to make sure that items were relevant, inoffensive, and easy to understand in all cultures.

Another example that’s very interesting to us was the term “spouse.” In Australia, Canada, and the United States, people said, “What do you mean by spouse?” They insisted that we add the term “partner.” However, if we say “partner,” people in Turkey, for instance, are very much offended, as this concept is not common in Turkey. We had to use a generic term, “spouse/partner.” The word “family” is a very simple word, but it means different things to different people. For some, it is the extended family. For others, it is the nuclear family. We

had to define these terms in the survey. Overall, it took two years to adjust and adapt these measures.

Lewis: What are you working on now? Do you any idea what the findings are going to be, or is it too soon?

Aycan: It is too soon, actually. We have almost completed the data collection. In total, we have surveyed 2500 individuals in nine countries. We are in the process of establishing the measurement equivalence, and it's going to be another painstaking process. We will have to see whether or not, despite all the work we have done to adapt and pilot the measures, if the measures are equivalent (for example, metric, structural, configural equivalences) before looking at the relationships.

Lewis: Obviously looking at culture is a huge challenge for WFC. What other challenges have there been?

Aycan: The measurement was the first challenge, as I mentioned, and we have addressed that area. Another challenge was to find the right sample. In some countries, researchers had difficulty finding and convincing people to fill out our long questionnaire. The countries where we had the most difficulty were the most individualistic, where asking too many questions about people's personal lives is considered rude. We've had huge difficulties in the United States and Australia. However, in India, Taiwan, Turkey, Israel, we did not have much difficulty collecting data. That was an interesting observation of cross-cultural difference.

Lewis: Is there a place for qualitative research in cross-cultural WFC research?

Aycan: Most certainly! We started our research with a qualitative phase by using focus groups. We had to ask people what their experiences were and gave them every opportunity to focus on their own experiences. We did not start out by imposing a model. If we have the opportunity, we would want to go back to renew our qualitative data to elaborate on the findings that we have from the quantitative data.

Lewis: So really, mixed methods are very valuable.

Aycan: Very much so. But on the other hand, we could not just rely on qualitative research, because we need to test the relationship and the strength of the relationship from a quantitative point of view.

Lewis: What do you think some of the key challenges are for practitioners focusing on cross-cultural issues? You've talked about multinationals and that's very important in the context of globalization. But are there any particular challenges for practitioners, employers, or policy makers?

Aycan: As with other HR issues, we need to appreciate the diverse workforce with different values, expectations, and norms. This is both challenging and rewarding. It is important to make sure that what you're doing in terms of policy and human resource management (HRM) matches people's expectations and values. That is tough, of course, because you cannot just tailor HRM to each individual's background in a formal organization. The main challenge for practitioners is to talk openly with employees about these issues and to not assume that everybody has the same values.

Lewis: Do you think that there's conflict between national culture and multinational culture?

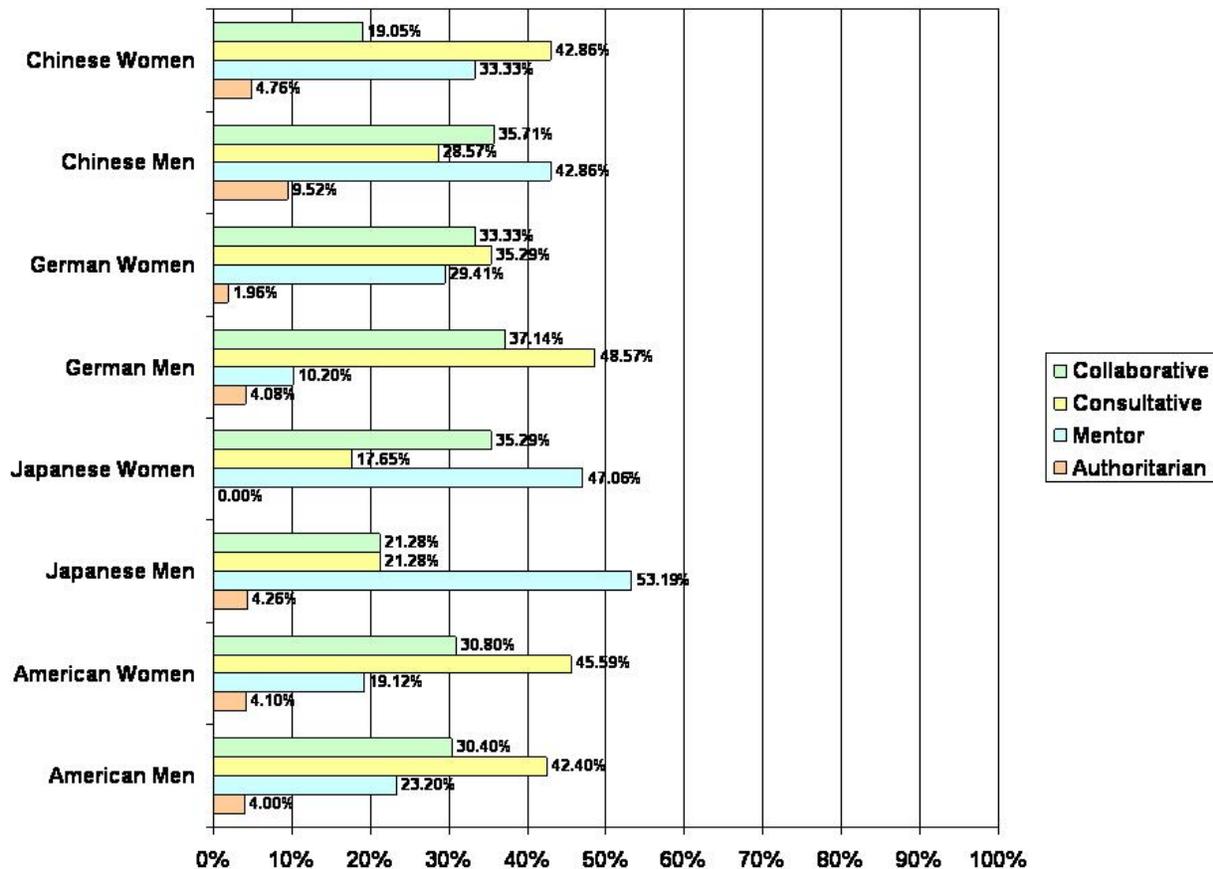
Aycan: Definitely. For instance, our students here are from Turkey and our university uses the American education system. Our students are very competitive and achievement-oriented. The majority want to be employed by multinationals. But after a while, even our students complain about their lives; they're complaining about not spending enough time with their parents. Their parents are saying the same thing; they're also complaining about overwork and high competition. So, yes, multinationals have a certain culture and that sometimes clashes with the national culture. Furthermore, parents and relatives are usually a strong influence. Our students tend to live with their families until they get married, even if they're employed. As long as you're in the local social or cultural environment, then there is clash between societal / family values and those of the institution where they are employed. After a couple of years, they start to question their life and some of them do terminate their employment. They go back to their family business or sometimes start working for Turkish companies, which are more flexible.

Lewis: That's very interesting. I was going to ask you whether you thought one of the end products of globalization is going to be a sort of melting pot where individual cultures will all merge. It sounds as if that's not going to happen.

Aycan: I don't think this will happen in the near future. The ideal is to find a third way, a combination of Eastern

and Western values that integrates and synthesizes the cultures' values. If Western values are imposed on the rest of the world, then I would say convergence is not very likely. Hybridization is very important. Just imposing one value on another will not automatically create convergence.

Workers' Managerial Preferences By Country and Gender



Source: Gunkle, M., Lusk, E.J., Wolff, B., & Li, F. (2007). Gender-specific effects at work: An empirical study of four countries. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 14(1), 56-79.

Additional Resources Related to Cross-Cultural Research and Work-Family

Global Perspectives - Multinational Retailers in the Asia Pacific: This research project from Cultures of Consumption ran from April 2003 through April 2007 and “explored the extent to which retailers from the U.K. and Japan transferred their parent country management practices...to Chinese subsidiaries.”

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/research/gamble.html>

Developing a Work/Life Strategy in a Multinational Enterprise (MNE): This entry from our Work-Family Encyclopedia by Anne Bardoel and Helen De Cieri “examines issues relevant to how multinational enterprises (MNEs) can build a strategic approach to global work/life issues from a human resource management (HRM) perspective.”

- To access the entry, click here: http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=3814&area=All

Global Perspectives - A comparison of the international diversity on top management teams of multinational firms based in the United States, Europe, and Asia: This full-text article from Singapore Management Review is available online at <http://www.allbusiness.com>. It details the results of three studies that examined the national composition or international qualifications of management teams in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

- To access the article, click here: <http://www.allbusiness.com/public-administration/national-security-international/4019164-1.html>

Global Perspectives - Information Guide: Diversity in the Workplace: “The information contained in this guide is intended to serve as a starting point for resources needed in a business setting.” Includes news and trends, business case information, statistics, rankings, and training.

- To access the guide, click here: <http://business.library.emory.edu/info/diversity/index.htm>

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