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Overcoming misperceptions through intercultural education: Promoting the understanding between Colombia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to find a way to promote cross-cultural understanding between Colombia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries in order to foster their bilateral relations in terms of academic collaboration and, eventually, in the fields of commerce and investment. First of all, the paper exposes the issue of existing misperceptions among cultures in today's world. In order to show that intercultural understanding can be achieved, two cross-cultural framework of analysis are used: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and the GLOBE Project. The findings of both studies are analyzed in a qualitative manner in order to identify possible similarities that might help draw links these two geographically distant cultures. After analyzing the findings of those two cross-cultural studies, some cultural similarities were found between the societies of Colombia and the so called Arab countries. Finally, upon reviewing the case of the Asia-Pacific Studies Center at Universidad EAFIT in Medellín, Colombia, it is proposed to replicate such an experience with a possible MENA studies center. This paper addresses the so far unstudied issue of the relations between Colombia and MENA; it also proposes a means to foster their rapprochement.

Keywords

Cross-cultural understanding, Globalization, Cultural Dimensions, MENA, Colombia.

Introduction

In the last three decades, the image about Islam and Muslim countries among average Westerners has been affected by some negative inputs that have contributed to create an atmosphere of misunderstanding and rejection. Among such negative influences it is worth mentioning: a widespread misconception

of Muslim countries as homogeneous and monolithic (Esposito, 1999), the daily flow of mainly negative news coming from some of those countries through the international media (Christensen, 2006), a generalized ignorance about Islam among the population in non-Muslim regions –e.g. the United States, Europe and Latin America –(Said, 2001) and, also, the opportunism of politicians – in Europe and in the USA- who want to gain political momentum by recurring to nationalistic rhetoric (Saikal, 2003)[¹],[²]. Even in Latin American countries, a region that cannot be fully identified as Western (Gupta, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002), there is widespread rejection toward Islam and generalized misconceptions about Muslims (García, 2007).

Likewise, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region there is evidence of negative perceptions toward non-Muslim nations, especially towards the so called West- promoted by particular intellectuals who regard foreign cultures as a threat to different aspects of their identity such as their customs, social structure and religious beliefs (LeVine, 2005).

However, the existence of negatively shaped conceptions is not an insurmountable fact and the ‘Clash of civilizations’ (Huntington, 1993) that has been envisioned in the last two decades by recognized scholars in the United States is not an unavoidable fate (Fox, 2001). In a global era characterized by increasing international transactions -not only in terms of movement of capital, goods and services, but also in terms of people moving across boundaries (Kearney, 1995) - it is both possible and imperative to develop avenues for mutual understanding among cultures. Intercultural dialogue can be facilitated by instructing people in tolerance toward diversity, and overcoming the ignorance about other cultures through cultural sensitization.

Literature Review. Cross-cultural encounter as a hermeneutic process: the role of cultural intelligence to overcome prejudices

Based on the theory of hermeneutics developed by Hans-George Gadamer (1989), human interactions can be described as interpretative processes in which the involved actors meet and learn about each other (Dallmayr, 2009). There may be previous assumptions (either positive or negative) about one’s counterpart, but these initial perceptions are not static; they evolve as the interpersonal encounter goes on. In the process of human interaction each individual recognizes the other’s alterity, contrasts pre-conceptions with the directly experienced perceptions and, finally, configures a more accurate judgment (the different phases of interpersonal interactions are exposed in table1).

Table 1. Phases of Cross-Cultural Encounter

STAGE OF INTERACTION	CHARACTERISTICS
Pre-phase	Each individual has pre-conceptions about his/her counterpart.
Dialogue between the parties	Mutual and shared appreciation
	Recognition of differences
	Revision of pre-conceptions
Post-dialogue phase	A new image about the other is conceived.

Source: This chart was made by the authors based on information extracted from Dallmayr (2009).

However, the role of initial perceptions may be more prominent when human interactions are given between subjects belonging to different cultures. The preliminary perceptions that an individual configures about persons from foreign cultures are strongly determined by information received from secondary sources, such as the media, which is assessed through the own culture's parameters (Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998). In cross-cultural interactions, poor previous understanding about the counterpart's culture leads us to regard the other as 'strange' or 'weird' (Lillis & Tian, 2010); in such context, the communication is pervaded by perceptual screens and the hermeneutic process previously described is not likely to progress from the second to the third stage. In order to overcome the adverse impact of negative initial perceptions in cross-cultural encounters it is useful to develop cultural intelligence, which is defined as "an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings" (Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, Ng, Templer, & Tay, 2007, p. 336). Such proficiency allows persons to set apart prejudices and articulate more accurate opinions about the others (Triandis, 2006) paving the way to mutual understanding. Cultural intelligence – also referred to as CQ- is a multifactor competence that comprehends *knowledge* about potential differences that can be found among cultures, a capacity to reason objectively in culturally diverse situations (i.e. reflective mindfulness) and behavioral skills necessary to adapt one's behavior in an unfamiliar context (Shawney, 2008). As a capability, CQ can be developed through a premeditated learning process (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009) consisting of cultural training and education in which sensitiveness and receptiveness towards foreign cultures can be achieved (Bolten, 1993).

According to the above, this paper addresses the issue of the misperceptions existing at the local level (i.e. in Colombia) about the MENA countries and their cultures, and how this question can be overcome. The following section of this paper is dedicated to analyzing the findings of two cross-cultural frameworks of study, in order to identify cultural similarities that can help Colombia get closer to countries in the Middle East and North Africa. After that, a general overview is given of the existing centers that currently promote the understanding of the Middle Eastern culture in Colombia. After identifying some limitations in the centers involved in the study, we shall consider the case of an academic and cultural institute located in the city of Medellín which has been successful in fostering the commercial, cultural and political relations of Colombia with another region of the world -the Asia Pacific region-; the purpose is to extract lessons that could be taken into account when considering to establish a similar institute devoted to the MENA region.

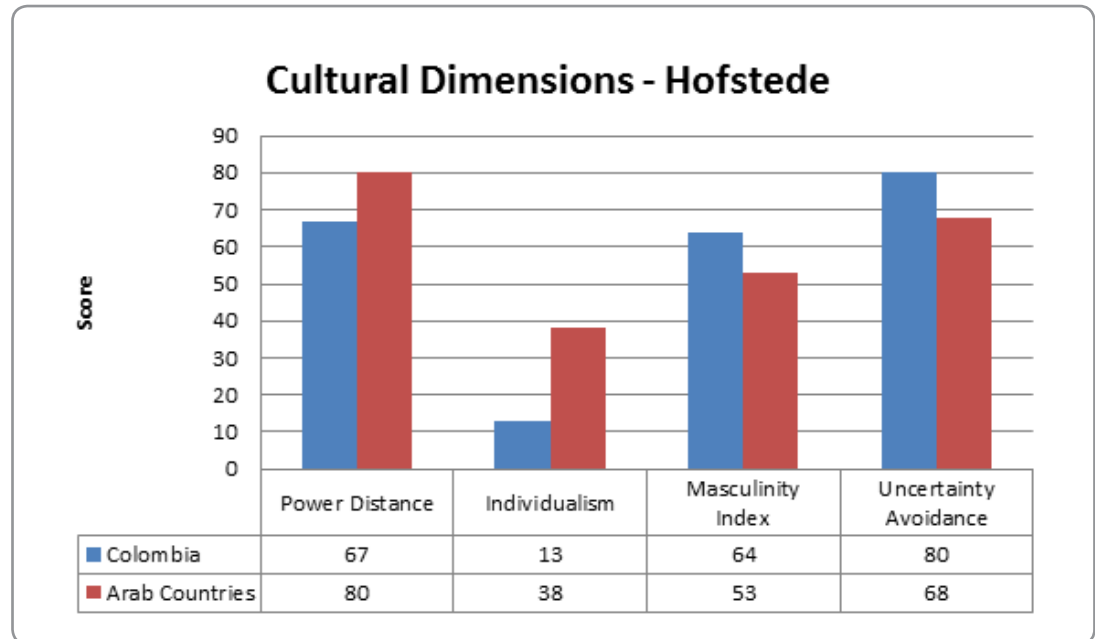
Finding similarities between Colombia and MENA countries

In spite of the geographical distance, Colombia has cultural features that may be similar to countries in the so called MENA region. This section compares Colombia and some Middle Eastern countries taking two cross-cultural frameworks of study as a reference. The first one is Geert Hofstede's study on Cultural Dimensions, which is one of the most widely used outlines for cross-cultural comparison in quantitative terms (Yeganeh, Zhan, & Sauers, 2009). The authors recognize that the Hofstede's study has some limitations given that it conceives values as totally stable over time, assumes that cultural patterns do not change and dismisses potential cultural differences within the borders of Nation-States (Fang, 2005). However that study is useful as an initial reference point. The findings of a second study, the GLOBE Research Project on Leadership Worldwide (House, Hanges, Mansour, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), are also taken into account in order to include a second point of reference.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions: Colombia and the 'Arab Countries'

In his study about cultural dimensions, Geert Hofstede (2005) classifies seven MENA countries – Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Libya- into a single category denominated 'Arab Countries'. Even though these countries have particular socio-economic and political conditions that make them differentiable from each other, they share cultural aspects such as language (Hourani, 1984), religion, historical background and values (Karande, Almurshidee, & Al-Olayan, 2006). The comparison between Colombia and the so called Arab Countries is shown in Graphic 1.

Graphic 1. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions – Colombia & Arab Countries



Source of the data: Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005. The graphic was elaborated by the authors of this paper.

Important similarities can be appreciated in the four cultural dimensions that have available data for both subjects of analysis (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005):

Power Distance Index is higher than the world average of 56.5 points in both cases. This means that hierarchical organization and respect for the authority of leaders are characteristic of them. Power is distributed in a vertical way in such cultures (Gannon, 2003).

Colombia and the Arab Countries can be considered to be collectivistic societies, given that they score lower than 50 points in the Individualism Index; Colombia is more collectivistic in relative terms according to Hofstede's findings.

For the masculinity index, which measures the degree of assertiveness displayed in social interactions, both cultures are above the world average (51 points). However the scores do not determine them as full masculinity societies, these cultures also have femininity characteristics, like caring for the others.

Finally, both cultures show higher levels of uncertainty avoidance compared to the 65 points world average. However, the analysis of this last dimension deserves some deeper examination. Even though this is a cultural similarity, the fact that Colombia and the Arab Countries rank high in terms of uncertainty avoidance may also be a source of divergence because 'uncertainty avoidance' makes reference to a culture's degree of rejection toward change and differences.

GLOBE study: Colombia and the ‘Arab Countries’

The GLOBE study is the report of a 10-year research program carried out with the aim of increasing the available knowledge relevant to cross-cultural interactions. The data was abstracted from 17.000 managers belonging to 951 organizations in 62 societies around the world and the information was classified into nine major cultural dimensions (House, Hanges, Mansour, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, p. 3). Those dimensions are classified in two different sets of scores: one is for the societal practices (i.e. the dimension as it is) and the other is for the values (i.e. the dimension as it should be according to considerations by each respective society). For the purpose of this paper the only dimensions that are going to be analyzed are the four equivalent to the ones presented in the Hofstede’s study.

The GLOBE study’s score methodology changes from Hofstede’s. To give a better comprehension of the results, the method is explained according to each dimension. Power Distance: This measure shows the level of acceptance of inequality among the members of a society with respect to power, authority, prestige, status, wealth and material possessions.

Higher level will be within the scope of 5.28- 5.80 and lower level within 3.89 – 4.11 Individualism and Collectivism: With this dimension, in contrast to Hofstede, the score evaluates the degree of collectivism (not of individualism) in a society. A higher level of this dimension will show that the examined society is more collectivist, and a lower level will show the individualism.

A higher level will be between 5.35 – 6.36 and lower level 3.53 – 4.26

Assertiveness: A high level of assertiveness shows that a society is driven towards achievement and hard work. Assertive societies are highly competitive ones. This is equivalent to Hofstede’s masculinity dimension (House, Hanges, Mansour, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, pp. 412-414).

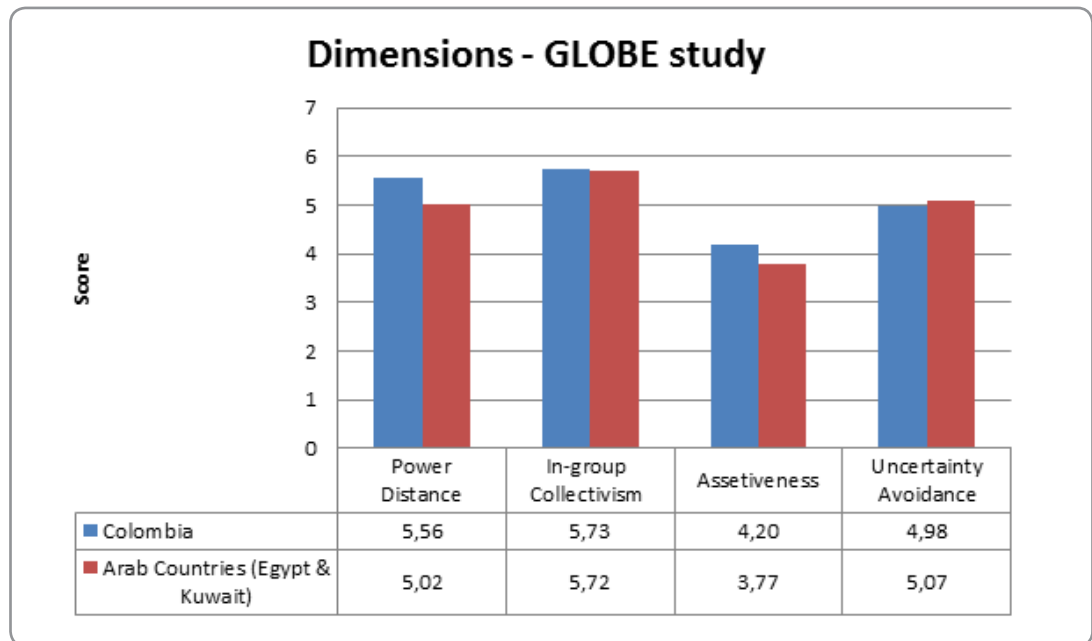
Higher level will be between 4.15 – 4.89 and lower level 3.38 – 3.47

Uncertainty avoidance: In contrast to the other dimensions this one is evaluated not with the practices’ scores, but with the values scores; in that way the comparison with the with Hofstede’s dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance is more accurate.

Higher level will be 5.07 – 5.61 and lower level 3.16 - 3.24.

In the GLOBE study some MENA countries are taken into account, each one separately: Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco and Qatar. In order to allow for comparison with Hofstede’s study, we take into account just the weighted scores of Egypt and Kuwait (Morocco and Qatar are not included into Hofstede’s category of ‘Arab Countries’). Based on the above specifications, the GLOBE study’s score for Colombia and the weighted score of two selected Arab countries are presented in graphic 2.

Graphic 2. GLOBE's Cultural Dimensions – Colombia & Arab Countries



Source of the data: House et al., 2004.

Important similarities can also be found with this framework of analysis:

Power distance Index is high in both cases, Colombia shows a higher score, but does not account for a major difference. This means that both societies tend to accept differences in terms of power and status (among others), showing a high respect to authority.

In the Individualism and Collectivism index, both societies rank in a high level of in-group collectivism with an almost equivalent number. With this information it is confirmed that both cultures grow under the team work ideology and family represents the core of the society.

For assertiveness, the results reflect the same difference that is shown in the Hofstede dimension of masculinity. Colombia represents a country with a slightly higher level of assertiveness than the selected Arab Countries.

Finally, uncertainty avoidance shows a high level for both countries.

Summary of the findings

Chart 2. Comparison of the Studies: Hofstede vs. GLOBE study

	HOFSTEDE		GLOBE STUDY	
	COLOMBIA	ARAB COUNTRIES	COLOMBIA	ARAB COUNTRIES
Power Distance	67	80	5.56	5.02
Individualism – Individualism and Collectivism	13	38	5.73	5.72
Masculinity - Assertiveness	64	53	4.20	3.77
Uncertainty Avoidance	80	68	4.98	5.07

This table compares the dimensions mentioned by Hofstede’s study and the equivalent dimensions mentioned in the Globe study. Sources: Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; House *et al.*, 2004.

The above table shows that the results of both studies are significantly interrelated; for example, if the index of a dimension in the Hofstede’s study is high (or low) for both cultures, the GLOBE study’s findings for that dimension in both cases are also high (or low). In order to examine each dimension, this part of the paper will show the differential in the results according to each proportion measure.

Power Distance: In both studies the cultures present a high level of Power Distance, the difference is that the Arab countries show a higher score than Colombia in the Hofstede’s dimension, but in the GLOBE study Colombia is slightly higher than the Arab counterparts.

Individualism: The Hofstede’s dimension shows a wider gap between the two subjects of analysis than the GLOBE study. Nevertheless, in both cases it is concluded that the cultures show a collectivist pattern.

Masculinity/Assertiveness: In this case we found a concordance in the results. According to both studies, Colombia presents a higher level of assertiveness than the Arab countries analyzed. But none of these cultures can be fully identified as masculine/assertive; they show manifestations of modesty and caring for others.

Uncertainty Avoidance: In contrast to the previous results, here a divergence can be found in the results of the studies, because Hofstede shows that Colombia is a country that is more against changes and new ideas or visitors, while the GLOBE study shows that the analyzed Arab countries have higher levels of resistance to change. However, it can be concluded that both show high levels of uncertainty avoidance; this could be the only dimension, out of the four analyzed, that might represent a source of misunderstanding between both sets of cultures.

Promoting Intercultural Understanding between Colombia and MENA: an approach through cultural education

This section explores the existing organizations that promote aspects of the MENA countries' culture in Colombia. After a brief overview of such centers and their limitations, this paper proposes to establish a center at the local level with an academic nature, aimed at fostering the understanding of that region of the world.

Existing Organizations in Colombia

So far, the most promoted cultural aspect of MENA countries, in Colombia, is religion. A growing number of Muslim practitioners' communities can be found in the country. There are Mosques in Bogota D.C., Maicao (a town in the country's northern coast), Medellin, Pasto, Bucaramanga, San Andres Island, Barranquilla, Santa Marta and Valledupar; being the first two biggest congregations (García, 2007). These congregational places are usually cultural centers as well, apt for praying, practicing and studying Islam and its life style. Most of them have lecture series about Islam, Koran lessons and Arab language classes. For all of the mentioned activities, the Mosques established in the country were built with the purpose of being a venue where local Muslims can find a meeting spot to foster integration with fellow believers. For non-Muslims, e.g. individuals and students, these centers are appropriate places to solve doubts and questions about Islam. The activities carried out by these religious/cultural centers have mainly spiritual and academic purposes; they tend not to engage in massive proselytism.

However, apart from religion -and to a lesser extent language- other cultural aspects that could provide more understanding of the MENA countries' traditions cannot be found in those centers. In order to foster the local population's understanding of the MENA, it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive kind of center. Namely, it is necessary to establish an academic institute dedicated to the study and cultural promotion of that region, which goal will be to counterweigh the stereotypes and misperceptions that are present at the local level.

An academic Studies Center for the MENA in Medellin- Colombia: a proposal

A successful example of academic center promoting the cross-cultural approach between Colombia and a specific region of the world is the *Asia-Pacific Studies Center* at Universidad EAFIT in Medellin, Colombia. The idea started with a local academic who proposed a course dedicated to teaching the different cultural,

political and economic aspects of the Asia-Pacific area in the framework of the International Business undergraduate program. Through the implementation of that course, that region began receiving attention in the University's academic community. Given the local interest towards Asia-Pacific, and also because of the region's increasing importance in global affairs, the International Business Department at Universidad EAFIT decided to open the respective studies center in February 2006. The purpose of that center was to deepen the understanding of the current relations of Colombia with the countries of that geographic area through scholarly research. It also aimed at promoting further rapprochement in the areas of commerce, investment and academic collaboration. Since its implementation, the Asia-Pacific Studies Center, has boosted the knowledge of that region's cultures in Colombia through a yearly event known as *The Asia-Pacific Week*, in which recognized lecturers from different fields (e.g. diplomats, academics, artists) expose topics related to the countries of the area. More recently, the Studies Center has started teaching Mandarin language with sponsorship from the Chinese government; a local venue of the Chinese *Confucius Center* has been operating in the Center's headquarters since the first semester of 2010 (Universidad-EAFIT, 2010).

The experience of the Asia-Pacific Studies Center can perfectly be replicated for the MENA region. An initial step to awakening the interest for knowledge about the MENA cultures in the local academic community may involve the implementation of a course dedicated to the study of the area in the International Business undergraduate program. Over time, a research program about the relations of Colombia with the countries of that region can be established. A similar event to the *Asia-Pacific Week* (i.e. a *MENA Week*) could also be programmed as the new *MENA Studies Center* gets institutionalized. For that purpose, the proposed center may establish contact with the embassies of Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Lebanon that are present in Colombia (MRE-Colombia, 2010). Moreover, it will be necessary to establish contact with academic communities settled in the countries of the region.

At this stage, this is still a proposal, but if it can be carried out the projected center could certainly contribute to encourage the understanding of the Middle Eastern and North African countries in Colombia, helping to configure a more truthful image of their cultures among the local population. This rapprochement could eventually lead to an increase in the levels of interaction between the regions at the levels of commerce, investment and education as new contacts will be established with public, private and educational institutions.

Conclusions

Economic, social and political interactions across nations are more common every day, thanks to technological advance and to the dynamics of globalization. But the world is still far from becoming homogeneous as diversity continues to be an issue in all kind of international relations (Olivier, Thoenig, & Verdier, 2008). While it is often argued that cultural differences are potential sources of conflict (Huntington, 1993), it is also true that those differences are not the obstacles to interpersonal understanding (Esposito, 1999).

Getting knowledge about different cultures and developing awareness towards them through cross-cultural training and education allows individuals to overcome prejudices, providing them with resources to articulate a more accurate understanding of foreign counterparts (Triandis, 2006). For this purpose, the work of cultural centers in charge of promoting the knowledge of different regions of the world is valuable.

The present study finds some cultural similarities between Colombia and a set of Middle Eastern countries in terms of collectivism, power distance and 'masculinity' according to the cross-cultural frameworks of analysis of Hostede (2005) and GLOBE Project (House, Hanges, Mansour, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Building up on these findings, this paper proposes that prejudices and misunderstandings among cultures can be counterweighed through the action of cultural/educational centers in charge of promoting awareness about foreign societies, their values and traditions.

A proposal for a studies center devoted to the MENA region in Colombia is outlined, an idea that still requires further elaboration. If this project could be carried out, it would certainly contribute to the promotion of improved relations among the two regions in terms of academic collaboration and, in the future, bilateral commerce and investment.

(Endnotes)

NOTES

1. For example, it is a common mistake (in the USA and Latin America) to confuse the terms *Arab* and *Muslim*, as it is usually assumed that all Arabs are Muslims or, conversely, that all Muslims are Arabs. Also, there is a widespread semantic confusion between the terms *Islam* and *Islamism*.

2. The most recent case of political opportunism based on the use of negative perceptions toward Islam has been the case of the 'Cordoba Mosque' possible construction in New York City, near to the place where the World Trade Center was located. Some Republican Party politicians have tried to politicize the issue. Further information about the issue can be found at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/04/opinion/04wed1.html?_r=1. Retrieved: September 4th, 2010.

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