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# Kolb and cultural differences

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I remember the first time I read that there was such a thing as a team process and that during the first phase of the process people run small talk and smile at each other. Then, I ran training courses for a dozen years. I worked mainly in the budget sector (schools, offices). I watched people's faces as they entered the hall, chose chairs, looked for a convenient place for their handbag, made last-minute phone calls, introduced themselves, talked about their expectations... And I was surprised. Because they were not usually smiling at the time. They had tense, sad faces. The smiles came much later.

Most of the adult learning theories that we refer to when designing and delivering workshops and training courses originated in American culture. Malcolm Knowles was from Montana, David Kolb from Illinois, and Bruce Wayne Tuckman (the one from Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing) from New York. Although Kurt Lewin came from Prussia, he was building up a body of scientific work related to group dynamics in an American context.

Would these theories have sounded different if they had originated in Central Europe? How do cultural differences affect adult learning? Do they have an impact on the Kolb cycle?

The topic of the impact of cultural differences on interaction, communication, thinking and decision-making has been studied for at least a century by Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Bronisław Malinowski, among others. Today, there are several research projects collecting data from all over the world (e.g. Hofstede Insights, GLOBE project, World Value Survey). However, most of the detailed work related to thinking and learning processes concerns the differences between the widely understood East (Japan, China) and the West (USA).<sup>1</sup> These studies rarely cover the specificities of Poland or Central Europe.

In this article, I will focus on the differences between the United States and Poland – perhaps they will help me to find an answer to the question “What would the Kolb cycle look like if it was created in Poland?”

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Nisbett, Richard E., “The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why?”

## On cultural differences

Culture is one of many factors – along with age, gender, education and character traits – that influences the way we learn. Cultures differ from one another. The dimensions of cultural differences related to adult learning may relate to the search for answers to questions such as:

What does it mean to:

- communicate well,
- behave culturally,
- speak frankly,
- lead effectively,
- be on time,
- establish relationships,
- make decisions effectively,
- cooperate,
- deserve recognition.

Every dimension of difference affects how people participate in workshops – how they think and behave. In most studies, the dimensions attributed to having the greatest impact on the way people learn are power distance, collectivism/individualism, uncertainty avoidance, low/high context, guilt/shame cultures, and independent/interdependent self cultures. We will look at some of these, those that clearly distinguish Polish culture from that of the United States.

### 1. POWER DISTANCE

In every culture there are inequalities. Power distance describes different approaches to social inequalities – the degree to which people living in culture accept differences in the hierarchy and unequal distribution of power. Some cultures treat inequality as a natural and respectable thing. In these cultures (so-called high power distance cultures), an autocratic style of leadership prevails. Powers that be are granted additional privileges. Authority attributes (such as titling) are highlighted and expected. The learning system emphasises knowledge and authority of the teacher. Pupils are expected to obey.

In communities with less power distance, privileges and signs of status are not so prominent. Rather, children are expected to be independent and to think

independently. The education system is learner-centred, encouraging questions, and free speech.

Poland is an example of a culture of high power distance, in the United States, the power distance is lower.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. LOW CONTEXT/HIGH CONTEXT

The concept of high and low-context cultures was first described by Edward Hall<sup>3</sup>. In high-context cultures, non-verbal messages, environment, and social position are important in the communication process. The communicative ideal in high-context cultures is to speak between words. Here, much of the responsibility for communication lies with the listeners. They should capture not only what is said, but also what is suggested, and thought. High-context communication is based on (often unconscious) assumptions – about common reference points and shared knowledge among all members of a community. Refusal is conditioned by norms of politeness (e.g. it is rude to agree to eat something the first time, we wait until the person encourages us a third time). In high-context cultures, the better-educated people are, the greater their ability to speak implicitly.

The communication ideal in low-context cultures is to speak simply, clearly, and straightforwardly (“Say what you mean and mean what you say”). You do not need to build a relationship to communicate. The social context of communication is much less important.

In low-context cultures, the more educated a person is, the higher their ability to communicate clearly and explicitly. The US is a low-context culture, while Poland is a much more high-context culture.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. COLLECTIVISM/INDIVIDUALISM

In collectivist societies, there is a need to be more attentive to the group, assigned roles are important, the harmony of social relationships is important, and individuals are seen first and foremost as members of the community. Children are taught to think of themselves as part of a group. Loyalty and group norms are important. In more individualistic societies, children are taught to think of themselves as independent individuals. The individual is seen as independent of the group – the individual is important, not the group. Freedom, development, and individual initiative are important.

The most individualistic culture in the world is that of the United States. Poland is a much more collectivist culture<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/poland,the-usa/>

<sup>3</sup> Hall, Edward T. “Bezgłośny język” (English “The Silent Language”), 1987, Warsaw

<sup>4</sup> Meyer, Erin. „The Culture Map”, 2014, New York

<sup>5</sup> <https://globeproject.com/results/countries/POL?menu=country#country>,  
<https://globeproject.com/results/countries/USA?menu=country#country> [accessed on 26.11.2021]

## 4. TRADITIONALISM/CYNICISM/HUMANISM

Research by Polish social psychologists reveals yet other dimensions by which Polish culture is characterised. Looking at the cultural map of Europe – Poland belongs to the cultural area of Eastern Europe<sup>6</sup>. Its characteristics include:

- ▶ traditionalism – manifested in a high valuation of tradition, security, power and conformity (as opposed to postmodern values such as subjectivity, hedonism, sensation-seeking and universalism);
- ▶ cynicism – expressing a lack of trust in others and attributing hidden, instrumental and calculating intentions to noble actions;
- ▶ humanism – manifested in the belief that “one must be human” – regardless of the rules or arrangements people must be forgiven their transgressions and weaknesses (e.g. waiving a fine).

## 5. UNEDUCATED OLDER WOMEN FROM SMALL TOWNS AND VILLAGES

Cross-cultural differences are an ambiguous research area. The dimensions of cultural differences are sometimes divergently understood and variously researched. Researchers get uneven and even contradictory results<sup>7</sup> – e.g. Hofstede attributes a high level of uncertainty avoidance to Polish culture, which Paweł Boski disagrees with, showing that Polish culture is a country with extremely low levels of uncertainty avoidance.

Research samples are another problem. Usually, the people surveyed are business people, i.e. most often – educated men living in large cities.

Yet countries are not cultural monoliths. Place of residence, origin (class and ethnicity), gender, age, education, the field of specialisation, and personal psychological traits – all affect placement on the scales of cultural dimensions.

It is likely that if uneducated, older women living in small towns and villages were surveyed – we would get a different picture of the Polish cultural dimensions. It would appear that we are very collectivist (family duties come first, there is no time/habit to take care of ourselves), very high-context (this is why my grandmother asks me a dozen times if I am sure I do not want cake), have a very high level of power distance (it matters how we sit at the table and who gets food first).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Drogosz, M. (ed.) “Podzielony umysł społeczny. Polacy po ćwierćwieczu demokracji.”, 2018, Warsaw

<sup>7</sup> vide Boski, Paweł. “Kulturowe Ramy Zachowań Społecznych. Podręcznik Psychologii Międzykulturowej”, 2009, Warsaw

<sup>8</sup> Geert Hofstede wrote about the difference in attitudes to power distance (the lower the education, the more power distance is accepted) in “Cultures and Organizations”; many feminist researchers (from difference feminism movement), e.g. Carol Gilligan, and cross-cultural psychologists, among others, have written about differences in the way of communication and approaches to individualism-collectivism.

## And what is the result?

Training courses and workshops appeared in Poland after 1989 together with stalls with re-recorded audio cassettes under the Palace of Culture. They aroused curiosity, desire, and a sense that they were coming to us from a better, better-knowing world. American training cultural norms – we address each other as “you” (low power distance), we speak directly about needs preferably using the I-message (low context), individual initiative and personal opinion of each person attending the workshop is important – have been accepted as simply better, more modern, happier. Dominant cultures tend to impose their view of the world as neutral and objective. And this is how Polish culture adopted the norms of American culture.

However, it is worth remembering that these are not neutral practices, they are embedded in a culture – you have to learn them before you can use them. Like everything we learn – it can provoke resistance from the group. Especially if it is a significantly different group from the American original. This would mean that if I am working with uneducated, older women from small towns and villages who are attending a workshop, these people are initially participating in the learning process significantly differently from prototypical American adults.

### 1. DIFFERENTLY, THEN HOW?

In the context of adult learning, there may be more distance between the facilitator and the participants in cultures of high power distance. There may be a prevailing perception that the facilitator should provide knowledge, demonstrate authority and set paths to follow. Participants may find it difficult to express open disagreement with the proposed content. Participants’ attitudes can be strongly influenced by their assumed expectations of trainers.

With high power distance go the characteristics of **collectivist cultures** – participants may be afraid of losing their face and exposing their weaknesses, and it may be difficult for them to share their reflections openly – if those reflections are different from the ones of those with higher status in the room. They may also be reluctant to express their own opinion, expecting the opinion to be presented by those higher in the hierarchy. There may be a perception that the young should learn, that the situation in which older people learn is somehow embarrassing for them. Education is viewed primarily as a way to increase social standing and gain prestige – so diplomas and certificates are very important.

In **high-context** cultures (those of between-words communication), the “here-and-now” experience and the social position of the speakers form the framework for understanding messages. There is a tendency to express oneself not directly. Since high-context communication is based on unstated assumptions – it is not easy to learn to communicate this way. Therefore, most misunderstandings occur between people from two different high-context cultures.

People from low-context cultures listening to people who communicate in a high-context way may feel that these people are deliberately omitting some information, or want to mislead. Therefore, one strategy for enhancing intercultural understanding is **low-context speaking**, and we often encourage such communication with those attending the workshops Communication directly.

The “I-message” is the low-context communication ideal. This way of communicating is much easier to learn than high-context communication. But still – it takes time.

## 2. KOLB THE POLISH WAY

Most of the studies investigating the relationship between cultural backgrounds and the way people participate in the Kolb cycle examine how specific cultural backgrounds influence the importance of particular learning styles<sup>9</sup>. In other words – from which part of the Kolb cycle do individuals in a given culture learn the most?

Polish culture rarely caught the attention of researchers, but fortunately, Kolb himself included Polish specifics in his study. Polish culture is on the edge of the scale of *Active Experimentation*.

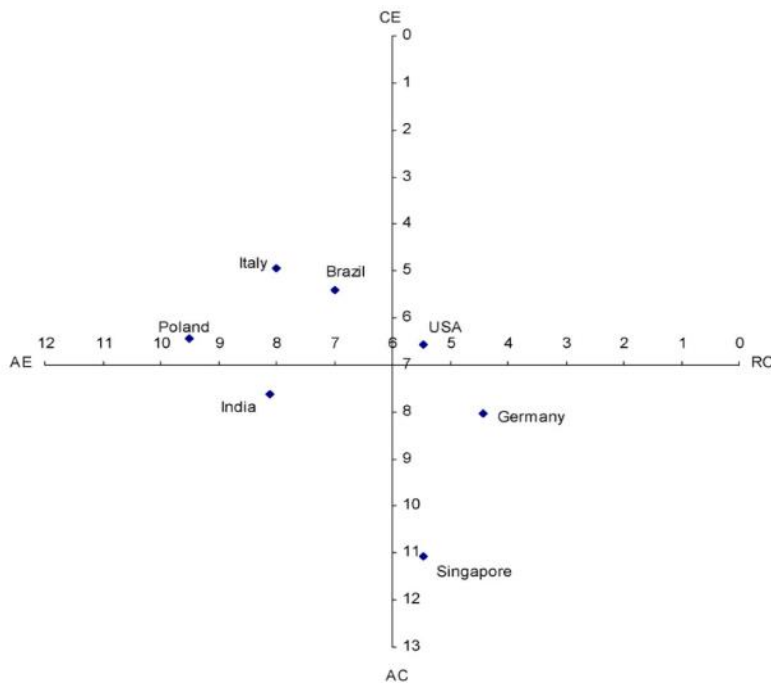


Fig. after: Joy, S., Kolb, D., “Are there cultural differences in learning style?”

<sup>9</sup> Learning style according to Kolb: diverging (CE+RO), assimilating (RO+AC), converging (AC+AE), accommodating (AE+CE).

### *Four stages of the Kolb Cycle:*

- *Concrete Experience (CE)*
- *Reflective Observation (RO)*
- *Abstract Conceptualization (AC)*
- *Active Experimentation (AE)*

We can draw similar conclusions from Yoshitaka Yamazaki's research – although he did not refer directly to Polish culture.

*Active Experimentation* is experimenting, trying, and testing. Acting without unnecessary worries about the consequences. Taking risks without fear. It is a pragmatic attitude that says – let's just do it and then we will see. It resonates with spontaneity, ingenuity, resourcefulness, improvisation, and bravado, in other words, everything summarised in the Polish "Jakoś to będzie" (things will work out in the end)<sup>10</sup>.

When working in workshops, it is worth being aware that the methodologies we use are based on certain cultural paradigms that are often already transparent and naturalised for us as trainers. But for those participating, they can be something new. What is more, cultural differences show up not only when I work with groups coming from other countries, but also when I work with groups that are different from me in terms of age, class background, place of residence, and level of education.

The most important thing in intercultural contact is to be aware of one's cultural conditions and not to treat them as something neutral or better.

The way we learn is not a trait written in our genes, but a dynamic variable that comes from the interaction between me and my environment and the demands that this environment makes on me daily.

**So every time you wonder what went wrong – after all, you agreed in your contract with the group that you will be on first-name terms, but they persist on calling you "Mr/Mrs" – everything is OK, it's just the high power distance of the Polish culture that manifests itself.**

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<sup>10</sup> Mickiewicz, Adam. "Pan Tadeusz", 1989, Warsaw



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