

## Personal Culture Paper

The Purpose of this paper is to look into the culture that I was brought up in and to examine the values of that culture. I come from Nis, Serbia, which is one of the countries that were a part of former Yugoslavia. Serbia is located in the center of Balkan Peninsula and has the population of eight million people. Historically, Serbia was occupied by many different nations and has been involved in six wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone. The turbulent and violent history played a big role in shaping the culture of the nation but the fall of communism and the arrival of democracy and capitalism are starting to slowly change the culture of Serbian people. It is very interesting to see that some of the espoused values are not being seen in anymore and have been replaced by some of the values that have never been a part of our cultural heritage.

### Operant Values

Operant Rank	Espoused Rank	Value	Dimension Name	Dimension Source
1	5	Family	Collectivism	Hofstede
2	6	Loyalty	Group-oriented; Femininity	Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck; Hofstede
3	4	Hospitality	Collectivism and Femininity; Basic Human Nature - Good	Hofstede; Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck
4	None	Living life	Being; Short term orientation	Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck; Hofstede
5	2	Patriotism	Communitarianism	Trompenaars
6	None	Entitlement	Ascribed Status; being	Trompenaars; Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck
7	None	Complacency	Being;	Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck
8	8	Compassion	Femininity	Hofstede

#### 1) Family

Family is without a doubt the most important operant value in Serbian culture. Family ties are the most important ones and they are the ones that are valued the most. In addition they also dictate the behavior in many situations because family always comes first. Although, it is clearly the most important operant value would say that it is espoused much less central than it operates as there are other values that are espoused as more important than family even though they do not operate at as high of level.

Throughout history families used to stay together for generations as male children would not leave the family home but would rather bring their wives into the family. This is still very core of Serbia culture. Young people do not often leave family home and they stay with their parents for their entire life. It is expected that children will take care of their parents once time for that comes. It is described as paying your dues to your parents "Parents take care of you when you are young and you are supposed to take care of them when they are old". In addition, siblings are very connected and involved in each other lives. This especially happens if they live under the same roof in which case there is no difference in the way people treat their own kids compared to the way they treat their nephews and niece.

Serbian culture is very collectivistic, which is a dimension that is found in both Hofstede's and Trompenaars work. Collectivistic culture such as Serbia values relationships with people and put those relationships above anything else.

## **2) Loyalty**

Loyalty has been embedded in Serbian culture through the series of stories that have been told from generation to generation. In these stories loyalty to friends, family, king and country was celebrated above anything else. This left a deep trace in our cultural heritage and loyalty is a value that can be seen on every step. Loyalty operates very high because for generations people have been relying on each other to survive hard times, especially in wars. Although, loyalty is one of the core espoused values of Serbian culture is still operates higher than it is espoused. Loyalty is especially important among family members and friends.

The most talked about act of loyalty was seen during a war in Bosnia which was a civil war based on religious and national hatred between Serbians (Orthodox), Croats (Catholic) and Bosnians (Muslim). In January of 1993 a group of Serbia soldiers was inspecting people on the market in Trebinje, Bosnia. When they established that one of these people was a Bosnian they started harassing him and torturing him on the street. His childhood friend Srdjan Aleksic who was a part of Serbian army jumped into the young man's defense only to see his fellow soldiers turn on him. Srdjan managed to save his friend's life but ended up in a coma and died six days later. He was awarded with the highest medal in Serbian army and his father said that "Srdjan died carrying out his human duty".

Loyalty can be put under the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's dimension of group-oriented society. In this kind of society the emphasis is on harmony and unity, and responsibility toward the members of your social group. Another Dimension would be Hofstede's Femininity where relationships are built and maintained throughout life. Culture encourages close personal relationships which makes it highly feminine.

## **3) Hospitality**

When a guest enters the Serbian home they are treated with the ultimate respect. Hospitality is a big part of Serbian tradition and people are always trying to show the world how friendly and hospitable Serbia is. It is one of the rare values that operates at the same level as it is espoused.

I played tennis since I was five years old, I traveled for tournament play from the age of eight and yet I have not stayed in a hotel until I went on a school trip when I was sixteen years old. In our culture it is very common to stay with friends and family when you travel. Guest is never a burden and hosts always try to please the guests by putting them in the best rooms, making the best food for the guests and making sure that every need of the guest is filled.

Hofstede's Collectivism dimension fits the value of hospitality very well. Serbia is a collectivistic nation and people are willing to expend their circle help other people. In this culture the same respect is shown to both in-group and out-group member. It can also be related to Hofstede's Femininity dimension because care for the ones in need is very central for Serbian culture. Furthermore, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck dimension of Basic Human Nature as Serbians think of people as mainly good and they trust in a good nature of people which is why they are willing to welcome a complete stranger into their homes.

## **4) Living life**

It is an odd value but at this point Serbian people are not worried about the future, they are all focused on the present and getting the most out of the present day. Long term planning does not exist and everyone is happy to live as they do. Young people like having fun, going out multiple nights every week, they are not thinking about finding jobs or starting families, they are happy having fun. This is a highly ranked operant value but it does not exist as an espoused value and there is no cultural heritage to support it. However, it operates as a very central value and it is changing the culture of the whole nation.

I had 32 classmates in high school. These were the people that I spent four years with seeing them every day and having every single class with them. They are some of my dearest friends. When we graduated, twenty six of us started college. It has been almost eight years since we graduated from high school and only two people from that class graduated from college. The rest are still enrolled but are taking it slowly because there is no rush in their mind, there is no job waiting, they do not have kids to worry about and they do not want to give up night life that has been the center of their social life for the last twelve years. Overall, they love having fun and they are not in a rush to give it up and society does not want them to because there are not enough jobs out there to be able to facilitate them all.

I can relate this to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck dimension of being culture where the present is the most important and future really does not matter as much. I can also relate this to Hofstede's short term orientation because people do not plan for things to happen and if something unpredictable does happen you find a way to deal with it on the spot.

### **5) Patriotism**

Patriotism is a value that can be defined as a preparedness of a person to always act in the best interest of the country. It can be reflected as love, support or preparedness to defend one's country if needed. Patriotism is highly espoused value in Serbian culture and it operates as one of the central values for our society.

As I previously stated, Serbia was involved in six wars in 20<sup>th</sup> century alone and there is no question that the majority of population is ready to enlist to defend the country. However, patriotism is best shown at the sporting events of Serbian national teams or individuals who play for Serbia in the biggest world competitions. Successful athletes are the biggest celebrities in Serbia and we refer to them as the greatest ambassadors of Serbia. Nowadays, Novak Djokovic is world number 1 in tennis and people are obsessed with tennis right now. The whole country stays up whole night to watch him play the US Open matches and they take every win with pride and every loss is emotional for the whole nation. During his matches we all breathe like one and if he wins the whole country celebrates together.



For me this is a great example of Trompenaars' Communitarianism dimension. People in this kind of society identify themselves as a part of the group or with the individual representing them. In this case everyone is the supporter of Serbian tennis star.

### **6) Entitlement**

People in Serbia believe that you are born to be successful. They believe that successful people are either born into rich and powerful family which sets them up to succeed or that people are born smarter than everyone else and that is the reason why they are successful. In later case hard work is dismissed and everything is attributed to talent. This is another operant value that completely contradicts the espoused value of Serbian culture which is that Serbian people are the hardest working people in the world.

Living in Serbia I heard a lot of stories about people who were studying in the US. Usually Serbian students would do really well in US and the conclusion that public was making is that we are a very smart nation and that Americans are a very dumb nation. This would be a typical comment "I know him he was an average student here, we had the same grades but I studied a lot

less than him. There were at least ten people in class smarter than him. Now he is the best student in his college in US". When I got here I realized why international students did well in school in the US. They studied all day long. They went from relying on their "brain" to relying on their own hard work.

However, entitlement does not refer only to "talent" but also to status by birth. People who were born in a certain family will have open doors for everything in life. Political elite does not live by the rules that apply to the rest of the population as they can do anything they want because they are holding the power. The connections are enough to get a good job or to acquire a very profitable contract. It is all about who you know and not what you know.

This cultural value is best connected to Trompenaars' Ascribed Status dimension. In Serbia the status is handed to you at birth and you just have to do what you are told and you will get yourself in a position to succeed. There is also some of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's being dimension in the entitlement value. Serbia is a being culture where people accept that they cannot succeed and they just live their life without even trying to move up the ladder.

### **7) Complacency**

Complacency can be defined as self-satisfaction when people are unaware of upcoming trouble. In Serbian culture everyone talks about how the standard of living is a lot worse now than it was two decades ago. However, there is no one ready to do something to change their position. When asked about it the answer is always the same "System does not work in our favor so we are going to wait for things to change". Complacency has become an obvious cultural value but it is not espoused at all. No one will ever admit that they have given up trying to make their life better.

My father held his last job in 1992. He was a manager in a big textile company but got fired after the merger. He never worked another day in his life. He searched for jobs but there was always something wrong with the company, position, and wage and usually it was below him to work at certain jobs especially at entry level positions. He never tried to open his own business or anything else that might contribute to family resources.

Complacency can be related to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's being dimension. As a being culture looking ahead is not important, which makes it easy to stay satisfied with present and not anticipate disturbances in the future.

### **8) Compassion**

Compassion is a value that can be defined as a feeling of deep sorrow and sympathy for someone who is dealing with misfortune and it is followed by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering they are going through. We are thought to be compassionate and to help the ones in need so this is a central operant value that is also a central espoused value.

Serbian was destroyed by war many times in history. People would lose whole family members along with all of their possession. My great grandfather Filip, returned from WWI to find his whole family dead and his house burned to the ground. He was devastated but the people from the village took him in, rebuilt his house, worked on his land so that it does not go to waste and even found him a future wife. People from the village helped him rebuild his life, move on and create a new family. Because of the compassion of those people I am was born as his descendent.

Hofstede's femininity dimension fits really well with a value such as compassion. Compassion reflects everything that can be put under a feminine definition, personal relationships, care for others and service to others. It can also be related to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's dimension of Basic Human Nature as Serbians consider themselves as well as other

people to be generally good and are willing to reach out and help the ones in need and they know that when they are the ones in need there will be people to help them.

### **Espoused but not operant values**

The main espoused value that is not operant any more or operates at a very low scale is face. Face used to be the very core of Serbian culture. Loosing face was worse than death, family members who did something to lose face for the family were disowned or even killed in order to restore face to the family. Nowadays, this does not happen and the value of face has deteriorated. Handshake used to be enough to make a deal but now people sign twenty different papers as insurance from fraud. Times have changed fast but face is still perceived as a key value in Serbian culture.

Hard work is another espoused valued that is not operant in Serbia. People used to be valued based on their commitment, attitude and quality of their work. However, communism changed that by allowing people to work less than other but enjoy the same benefits as everyone else. Now people talk about good times under the communist regime because they had everything they wanted without having to work that much for it. However, people will not admit that they are lazy or not hard working they will instead say that there is not enough options and those available options are not worth their time. Therefore people do not work and country kept spiraling into abyss.

Justice, is the last espoused value that is not a part of Serbia's operant values any more. Before WWII everyone had the same rights before court. There was a case in which the King lost the court case and had to pay the other person. However, when communist party took over the ones within the party become more powerful than judges and it was easy to influence the decisions. Once that started happening the whole justice system collapsed. People still believe in justice but we can see day after day that it just does not play out the way that it is perceived by the public.

### **Conclusion**

This paper helped me learn a lot about myself and my culture. I looked at my culture from a different angle and I saw some great things like family, compassion, hospitality, patriotism and loyalty. It makes me proud to be from a culture that highly values these things and in which these values are central and operant.

I also realized that some of the things that I was raised to believe in are dying out in my culture because of the certain changes that the country went through over the last half a century. Face lost its value and so did the hard work but I hope that as the situation in the country improves some of the core values that were so strongly embedded in our culture just a few generations ago will again emerge and become operant.