OD in Afghanistan: A Comparison of Values and a Proposal of What is Essential about OD?

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Abstract

This article explores how the sometimes hidden power of cultural context, in Afghanistan and in the practice of OD, impacted the change consulting process. Since the original publication of this article, more cross-cultural models have been developed and the dialogue about how to adapt OD methodologies across cultures has become more prominent. OD continues to be in a unique position to succeed in complex, cross-cultural environments due to two of its key elements: use of self and action research. Embodying them enables crucial skills, indispensable when consulting within challenging environments.

Keywords: values, organization development orientation, cultural context, cross-cultural, Afghan National Culture, action research

After working in two separate public sector OD projects in Afghanistan, funded by USAID (US Agency for International Development) and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), in 2007 and 2008, and spending a combined total of 5 months in that country, I gained an appreciation for the potential of OD in such a challenging environment, despite its cultural biases. In an earlier article (2008) I looked at the world of international development in Afghanistan through an OD lens. I also explored how having an OD orientation – embodying the essence of the discipline – was key to having a positive impact in a complex environment where some OD tools won't work. Now, I will explore how the sometimes hidden power of cultural context, in Afghanistan and in the practice of OD, impacted the change consulting process, especially when the underlying values contrasted. This exploration is particularly relevant to the profession of OD, which is increasingly applied in contexts beyond the culture of its founders. It is also relevant for those who seek change in environments different from the promoters of change. The twin blinders of pre-conceived notions about a client and lack of self-awareness interfere with a consultant's ability to perceive and navigate effectively in human systems. The former derives from ignorance about a client's environment and mindset, the latter from ignorance about one's own filters. Ignorance or lack of skill in surfacing these blinders on the part of the consultant inevitably reinforces resistance to change. [i] For this reason, OD, despite its cultural bias, is in a unique position to add value in complex, cross-cultural environments with its emphasis on two key elements of an OD orientation: use of self and action research.

Both methodologies help mitigate the damage of the twin blinders and enable greater skill when consulting within a challenging environment.

In this article, I will start with a brief background of the players and the domains of the projects. The main body of the article then contrasts the Afghan national culture (which I will call ANC) as captured by Entezar (2007) who used Hofstede's (1980, 2001, 2005) original four dimension model of culture[ii] to try to explain deep values of Afghans, beyond behaviors, to foreigners hoping to work successfully in the country.[iii] I will contrast Entezar's ANC values with Jaeger's (1986) values of OD and will show how each of the four dimensions affected the consulting process. Then I will discuss why two key elements of an OD orientation were important to our work: use of self, which enabled self-awareness, and action research, which was key in increasing our awareness of the client system. I will conclude with a discussion of the implications for the field of OD.

Background

My colleague and I are white, female Americans privileged to hold advanced degrees. We subcontracted to different consulting firms operating in Afghanistan during the two projects who employed both Afghans of various tribes and foreigners from a variety of countries. There was a mix of men and women in the firms. Our clients in the Afghan government, amongst different organizations in both the central government and several provincial governments, were mostly men, from a mixture of tribes, and typically well established in terms of tenure in the government. We used an adapted version of action research heavily balanced with diplomacy.

Expectations about Equality

Entezar, a cross-cultural trainer, used interviews, stories, observation and other forms of data collection, to determine how Hofstede's model of culture applied to the national culture of Afghanistan. He used the same four original dimensions as Hosftede to isolate patterns of values. The first dimension, Power Distance (PD), is "defined as the extent to which the less powerful members...within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (2005, p. 46).   Entezar suggests that the ANC has high power distance, meaning that most Afghans expect there to be inequality in society, whether between parents and children, between men and women, or between those in power and those with less. In contrast, Jaeger proposes that OD as a profession values smaller power distance, meaning OD practitioners promote greater equality[iv].   In our work, this contrast of values presented a huge gap in expectations on a systems level, as well as on a practical level. (Table 1)

Table 1.
Power Distance in the Afghan National Culture

Power Distance (PD)	
Low – OD	**High – ANC**
Inequality should be minimized	Inequality/ hierarchy should be preserved
Decision-making participative	Decision-making autocratic
Social power is persuasive	Social power is coercive

On a systems level, we represented the occupying force in a nation at war. The invasion of Afghanistan by the US-led coalition forces in late 2001, the subsequent overwhelming presence of US and international armed forces as well as foreign aid workers created a dynamic which placed us higher in the hierarchy of influence than we might have experienced in a different system, or in a different time in this system, and gave us additional leverage (and of course invited understandable resistance).

On a practical level, we had to make sure we had the expressed sponsorship of senior players in order to be able to deal with people lower in the system (typical of most OD practitioners operating in a formal hierarchy). Often, this meant weeks of introductions through credible people. Our introductions were sometimes blocked by individuals wary of our presence and approach, so persistence was key.

In addition, we made sure we isolated levels of hierarchy in our series of data collection meetings to promote a safe space for discussion, since individuals rarely countered their superiors publicly. We did attempt to encourage participation (low PD) within these isolated groups, though typically one or two dominant players (high PD) usually made the decisions for the group.

One thing we learned early on was that using our personal power was critical. Cultures high in power distance tend to place more emphasis on personal rather than institutional control. We needed to convey strength, clarity and be willing to balance respect with assertiveness in order to earn credibility. Entezar (2007) notes that for Afghans, the authority of the person, rather than the authority of the rule determines social weight. We gained little from trying to persuade clients of the value of our approach, but were able to gain more from how we conducted ourselves. We were also challenged to adapt to an environment where assertiveness and intimidation are used to establish personal power. Though we took pains to be respectful of the culture and individuals, we were sometimes openly confronted, which we met by standing our ground, sometimes "toning" (a concept from the military of raising one's voice to convey strength and importance).

With such emphasis on personal power, institutions have not been historically strong in Afghanistan (Azoy, 2003, p.27) Azoy further notes that "the Afghan form of authority resides neither in permanent corporations nor in formal statuses, but in individual

men who relate to each other in transient patterns of cooperation and competition" (2003, p. 24). Since authority is considered impermanent and insecure, our focus was much more on assessing and strategizing current relationships rather than the current state of the system. Job descriptions and organizational charts (often drawn up by outsiders) did little to illuminate the situation. Instead, we had to strategize intensely around the covert processes and navigate daily with little roadmap.

Anxiety about the Unknown

The second domain of Hofstede's model is Uncertainty Avoidance (UA), which he defines as "the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" (2005, p. 167) Cultures that have strong uncertainty avoidance tend to have clear and strongly reinforced rules about what is acceptable in order to manage the anxiety of uncertainty. In the case of Afghanistan, according to Entezar (2007), people feel that chance plays a bigger role in what happens than choice.   Afghans tend to embrace a fatalist orientation - life generally is out of control (some Afghans, in response, use the Arabic phrase "in sh'allah", or "God-willing" when someone expresses a wish for the future). In fact, it could be said that they view the confidence we have in the West about controlling our environment as hubris. Therefore, there is a tendency in Afghanistan to focus on the present, rather than the future.

In contrast, Jaeger (1986) observes that OD is weak in uncertainty avoidance. The profession of OD was founded in a more stable environment, one filled with post-World War II hope, enabling a future orientation. OD practitioners promote planning and choice within this assumption of stability. This inevitably led to a challenge in our work to even have a discussion about future possibilities. Many in our client systems knew well that focusing on moment-to-moment tactics was safer and more personally rewarding than railing against uncontrollable forces.

Table 2.
Uncertainty Avoidance in the Afghan National Culture

Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)	
Weak - OD	**Strong - ANC**
Less stress is experienced	Uncertainty felt as a continuous threat
Aggressive behavior frowned upon	Aggressive behavior accepted
Future orientation possible	Present orientation common

An interesting reaction to this dynamic environment, both on the part of clients and on the part of other development consultants, was a strong emphasis on details, such as

those that end up in reports to donors. Typically, in an OD engagement, the consultant will at some point draw their client into a conversation of the big picture - either the future, or the current state, but from a broader, "higher altitude" place where one might seek perspective and inspiration. However, in such an unstable environment, details provided a safe zone where action could be taken without the volatility of ideas. A perhaps unintended consequence of this orientation was that the desired future state became the shadow, meaning that it was either unacknowledged by the client, who knew that no one could predict, nor plan for, the future in such an environment, or overemphasized to the point of unattainable fantasy on the part of development consultants, and in any case hard to manage.[v] As a result, any improvement or change tended to be unacknowledged, as it could not possibly meet such high expectations. In terms of responding to this dynamic, we chose not to get bogged down in details, which had the potential of undermining more valuable conversations, and furthermore, we earned credibility with our clients when we promised not to take data and merely submit a report to them or the donors. Instead, we continued to promote the idea that what we wanted to help them with was hopefully practical and useful, even if perhaps aspirational.   We also found that focusing on the tangible, without getting lost in details, led to greater impact and trust with the client, and offered a means to bridge the enormous cultural gap. (Table 2)

Another element of ANC culture related to UA is an emphasis on experts, since experts are in a position to identify what is right and wrong, something valued in a strong UA culture. Entezar (2007, p. 54) notes that many heads of ministries have advanced degrees in the government (though not necessarily in management). OD, reflecting its comfort with the unknown, however, values process over expertise. Thus, although we were granted status by our advanced degrees, there was an expectation from our clients that we would tell them what to do. However, consultants that had previously told clients what to do did not fare well. We interpreted this paradox to mean that although there might have been a cultural expectation to deliver expertise, it ended up being unacceptable to the client since expert advice rarely acknowledged the values and realities of the client system. Consequently, the gap between their expectation and what we delivered led to some confusion. The same gap also existed with some of the donors to the project, who were accustomed to seeing the design and delivery of expert consultation and thus had some difficulty appreciating our approach.   This meant that we had to expend effort both acknowledging this difference, and protecting the consulting process through dialogue, education and debriefs.

The Individual and the Collective

In Hofstede's third dimension, Individualism/Collectivism, (IND), he explores the contrasts between individualist cultures and collectivist cultures. In individualist cultures, "the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family….(at the other end of the spectrum) Collectivism…(describes cultures) in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (2005, p. 76). Entezar (2007) places the ANC at the collectivist end of the spectrum, meaning that relationships, especially tribal loyalties, have clear value over task, and Jaeger (1986) places OD in the middle of the spectrum, valuing task, but promoting the attainment of task through effective relationship. (Table 3)

As mentioned in my earlier article (2008), building relationships was key to having any kind of trust or influence. Active listening, reflecting medium IND values, is typically used in OD to enable the practitioner to promote the achievement of a task by building trust with the client. By using active listening, we were able to learn, elicit client confidence regarding our intentions, and earn the right to push back when appropriate.

Table 3.

Individualism in the Afghan National Culture

Individualism (IND)	
Medium Individualist - OD	**Collectivist - ANC**
Task and relationships important	Relationships over task
Individual differences valued	Tribal identity valued
Systems-thinking valued (but not at the expense of the individual)	Reputation a form of social currency
Expertise and performance a form of social currency	

In a collectivist culture, reputation is one of the few sources of social capital beyond tribal and familial relationships. We were helped by the fact that we subcontracted to a firm with a strong reputation for being a serious player.   We were given status and respect merely for being associated with highly skillful colleagues in an organization known for delivering what it promised. It also helped when we complemented the work of a mature, multi-year project. Clients in the government had had the opportunity to get to know players in the project, had engaged in many dialogues over time about what approach best suited the situation, and had benefitted from success across multiple domains of the project. However, we were under pressure from the beginning of our project to maintain the good reputation due to the dynamic shifting of power relationships mentioned earlier.

Related to IND is the observation that Afghanistan is a society that values the oral tradition and verbal communication over the written word. On the surface, this meant that putting things in writing had less weight than it does in the West, and that taking a literal and legalistic perspective, as do many development consultants, bought little influence and could actually backfire. As a result, our contracting with our clients was entirely verbal. On a more subtle level, this meant that stories mattered, and that listening to stories mattered quite a bit in terms of showing clients respect and understanding their worldview better.

Masculine and Feminine

The fourth dimension of Hofstede's model is masculinity (MAS). Hofstede observes that "a (culture) is called masculine when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough and focused on material success, whereas

women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life. A (culture) is called feminine when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life." (2005, p. 120). Entezar (2007) observes that the ANC is a high masculinity culture, where the roles between men and women are very distinct and clearly defined in traditional terms. Jaeger (1986) suggests that OD is a low masculinity culture, promoting less distinction between gender roles and greater equality between the sexes.

Table 4.
Masculinity in the Afghan National Culture

Masculinity (MAS)	
Low - OD	**High - ANC**
Equality and non-differentiation between genders	Traditional gender roles reinforced
Nurturing linked to high performance	Nurturing a role for women
Public expression of vulnerability valued	Public expression of vulnerability a liability

Afghanistan is a male-dominated society (positions of power and leadership are held almost exclusively by men) where women on the whole are asked by society to stay indoors, hidden from the public, raising children and serving their families. The majority of Afghan women who want to be considered respectable, and avoid harassment, must be accompanied by a man in public, and must remain covered by a chadar (head covering) at least, though many still wear a burkha (covering them from head to toe).   In acknowledgement of and respect to this high MAS environment, my colleague and I always covered our heads, dressed conservatively and, when walking in public, were conscious of dropping our eyes to the ground and pulling in our energy so as to not draw too much attention (though we did anyway when not accompanied by men). In meetings with clients, however, we balanced the respect for the high MAS culture we were in with our own low MAS values, using direct eye contact and a confident presence, which we were at some liberty to do as foreigners. We acted in this way because we not only sought respect as individuals, but wanted respect paid to our consulting process. Although many of our clients in the government had been exposed to foreigners, our identity as females created both a helpful and a hindering dynamic. On the one hand, our presence appeared to unsettle some clients, throwing off the usual patterns of comfort that exist in interactions among men. Not too many Afghan men had experience dealing with women in roles of power. On the other hand, some clients seemed to be open to us, and were unusually gracious and hospitable - in an almost protective way. It might be said that they were more willing to talk with us because we were not perceived as threatening to them as other men might be.

OD Orientation: Use of Self and Action Research

I have discussed the differences between the national culture of Afghanistan and the culture of OD through Hofstede's lens and how it affected our consulting process. The following presents why I believe use of self and action research, key elements of an OD orientation, were essential methodologies in enabling us to have some productive impact in our project work that was respectful of our client's environment.

Use of self is a practice of consciously raising awareness of one's own filters, one's point of view and one's assumptions, then using such awareness to further the process of mutual learning in a client system. We would not have been able to navigate in an environment like Afghanistan without this practice. On the one hand, the practice of use of self- enabled us to be aware of the biases we brought about the use of OD, per Jaeger's (1986) observations, as well as our general worldview. (We did not, however, use much self-disclosure with clients in this political environment - formality and diplomacy worked more effectively in bridging deep cultural divides.) On the other hand, while we had to adapt, we could not lose ourselves in the process. There was much in the environment that challenged our sense of ourselves, so without a daily practice of reflection and debriefing, we might have been lost. Use of self- enabled us to get a handle on our feelings and concerns and manage them in a way that took care of ourselves while serving the client well.

In terms of helping us be open to learning about the client environment, action research (the repeated cycles of contracting, data collection, diagnosis, feedback, and action) was invaluable as a methodology. Action research is to a complex client system what snow shoes are to deep snow – it allows a lightness of step so that one can keep moving. The action research process assumes ignorance regarding the client environment, and uses all data to move from ignorance to awareness. Even more powerful, the client, who also learns what assumptions are at work in their system, ideally mirrors the consultant's own journey. Awareness, and ideally, consensual clarity around the underlying assumptions in the client system, may arguably be the single most powerful outcome a client will get from the OD consulting process. Also, by raising assumptions, consultant and client are in a better position to bridge the gaps in their worldviews. Expert consulting, which is predominant in the international development world, assumes too much and is often unaware of its biases to be of broad use in a complex, cross-cultural human system dynamic. We found that an adapted version of action research did indeed work in Afghanistan. We adapted the process to spend much more time up front identifying the client. In a political system, and especially one with the additional layers of foreign donors involved, the client was not as easily defined as it would be in a more transparent, bottom-line organization. We also spent much more energy contracting and re-contracting, though much of what was understood by us and our clients to be the nature of our consulting relationship remained covert despite our efforts to make it more explicit and negotiated. We also proceeded more carefully and diplomatically with regards to surfacing issues than we might in a US, bottom-line organization or in an environment in peacetime. Action research was effective at raising issues, focusing the attention of the organization, building momentum and unearthing obstacles to change, though it was not always safe to pursue the nature of the obstacles. Use of action research led in one case to unprecedented discussions in one system about mission and vision. Our process was rarely linear nor predictable and thus benefitted from the iterative nature of action research.

Summary and Implications for OD

In our OD consulting work in Afghanistan it was vital to learn about what was unique about our client environment as well as to consciously be aware of our own worldview. Many of the values of OD were in complete contrast with the national culture of Afghanistan, so we had to adapt our approach. However, that which is essential to an OD orientation, use of self and action research, enabled us to bridge the very gap we presented with our presence.

What potential does OD have in the world of international development? In a world of answers, OD is at ease with questions. In a world of consultant-centered solutions, OD provides the methodology to elicit client-centered solutions. In a world of well-meaning consultants who are equipped only to handle the relatively well-controlled environment of business, OD consultants are trained to deal with the chaos of human interaction. The application of an adapted form of OD is a powerful alternative to the existing approaches towards change in the developing world.

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The discussion of the larger context of why the US and its coalition are in Afghanistan and whether we should be promoting change is not addressed in this article.

Hofstede later added a fifth dimension, "short- and long-term orientation" (now called Pragmatic vs. Normative) which Entezar felt less relevant to Afghanistan; Hofstede's sixth dimension, Indulgence vs. Restraint, is not addressed.

Entezar emphasizes that one must generalize to describe a culture as ethnically diverse as the one found in Afghanistan, which is home to a number of tribes including Pashtun, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Aimaqs, Baluchies, Turkmen, Nuristanis and others.

As in OD, low PD is reflected in the larger rhetoric surrounding the US occupation of and aid to Afghanistan which encouraged democracy

In fact, there is a dynamic I call the "blank slate" mentality that originates in the US - based on the fantasy that early Americans created a powerful country out of nothing - a new world with new promises and possibilities out of a virgin Eden, ignoring a history of genocide, slavery and oppression. The myth of endemic perfection persists in our attempts to "make-over" other countries in an idealized image of what we, ourselves, are not even able to achieve.