

Influences of Cultural Differences on Construction Project Delivery: A case of Gauteng Province

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Abstract:

The Construction Industry is by nature one of the most diverse working environments. The South African Construction Industry is not an exception to this rule. The Industry has witnessed great diversity in its workforce mix at all levels since the return to democracy in 1994. Thus, peoples from erstwhile segregated communities are brought together to work in achieving a common project objective. The intricate influence of this cultural mix and the pressure it exerts on the project teams' ability to deliver on its mandate is the motivation for this study. This paper provides insight into the influence of culture and cultural difference on teams working together towards project delivery. The study adopts a mixed method approach by use of interviews and questionnaires through a convenience sampling of construction professionals in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. Findings from this research confirm that factors such as sociability, masculinity, power, equity, individualism, avoidance, collectivism are cultural dimensions prominent in multicultural teams. The influences of cultural aspects that rank highest are irritation due to misunderstanding, encouraging team building, motivating workers to work harder. The study concludes that while a lot has been done in integrating project teams from different cultures in the South African construction industry efforts should be concentrated on mitigating the effect of masculinity and irritation due to misunderstanding. It is recommended that Project Managers and Construction managers should more sensitive to the influence of cultural dimensions and deploy cultural awareness and appropriate leadership styles in mitigating its effects while channeling the positive influences towards organizational benefits. This research has provided insight into intrinsic cultural dimensions among construction industry workers in the Gauteng Province of South Africa and provides useful policy input for the Construction Industry Development Board and industry practitioners at large. The research is limited to the experiences of Construction Industry professionals in the Gauteng Province of South Africa due to the constraint of time.

Keywords:

Construction, Contractors, Culture, Projects

1 Introduction

South Africa's construction industry has become widely diverse especially following the adoption of democracy in 1994. Effective tools like the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment have assisted in the diversifying the construction sector hence the researchers, Thwala & Khumalo (2009), argue that it is unlikely not to have multicultural construction professional teams in a contractor firm in South Africa. Cultural differences within a contractor firm are important as these can help establish a working environment that offers mutual respect, understanding, support as well as the appreciation of individuals and their contributions (Emuze and James, 2013). Jiang and Pretorius (2011) acknowledged that cultural differences have an effect on communication which in turn influences various project management functions such as negotiations, team building, conflict resolutions as well as other contract

processes. Also, Jiang and Pretorius (2011) further illustrated that cultural differences can affect various project management procedures and practices and that effective team management of the cultural differences is essential for project delivery.

There exists a fundamental link between culture and performance as well as the outcomes of a construction project. Different cultures in a single environment have the ability to exert various influences to the efficient management of the project. The influences of cultural differences have a relationship with the leadership and teamwork of a project (Ogunsanya, Aigbavboa and Thwala, 2015). With that said, adverse influences of cultural differences could also ultimately assist in project delivery because lessons are learnt and people overcome their culture shock. Culture shock occurs when people migrate into a foreign culture (Greg and Larson, 2003) and become mentally puzzled by the cultural dimensions of that foreign culture.

Also, the first objective of any project is to fulfil the needs of the customer or client. Knutson and Bitz (1991) define Project Management as the execution of systematic processes such as planning and scheduling; controlling the project and its expenditure; decision making; and management of resources to produce an end product. Project management has become a critical component in the successful management of the human resource and thus, the management of cultural differences within a construction project. A fundamental phenomenon common to all cultures is the communication aspect, which is a significant contributor towards effective project management and ultimately, the accomplishment of a project. Successful projects are the core attributes of a successful construction company.

Despite the aforementioned, Ochieng and Price (2010) believe that there is a lack of empirical information to conclude that cultural factors influence projects. Thus, earlier studies by Thwala and Khumalo (2009), Jiang and Pretorius (2011), Emuze and James (2013), and Ogunsanya, Aigbavboa and Thwala (2015), have studied different aspects of culture in the construction industry in South Africa. However, the gap is in identifying the attributes that influence cultural relationships in the industry the most at the project level. This is the gap this paper seeks to fill. The aim of this study is to identify cultural factors that influence human relationships and to investigate the influence of cultural differences on construction projects in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. The paper undertakes a critical review of literature on culture and cultural differences, cultural models and its dimension to the management of cultural differences. Thus, progresses to use a mixed method design to ascertain construction professional experience of identified features in the literature and concludes with a recommendation for project managers and industry practitioners.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Culture and Cultural Differences

Culture is a vastly complex aspect of people's daily lives and thus it remains difficult to conclude its exact meaning. Numerous researchers have their own connotations as to what culture means although it remains a vivid concept. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) define culture as the collective ways in which groups of mutually understanding people interpret the society and the world as a whole. Chan and Tse (2003) suggested that the essence of culture is the systematic beliefs, views, practices, rules, behaviour, perspectives as well as worldviews shared within a society and it has been carried down from generation to generation ultimately becoming a norm. Goffee and Jones (1996) mention that culture is an outcome of how people relate to one another. It surrounds us and shapes our vision of the world and how we interact with it. Culture is a major determinant of human behaviour because each culture

tends to distinguish itself from another based on background, beliefs, values and reactivity to certain situations. Thus, it was observed that different societies may have different manners of adopting and reacting to situations (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). It is from this standpoint that South Africa can be investigated through several criteria such as location. The locations of construction projects are vital in terms of cultural diversity to be encountered. As different places within the country have different cultures due to the environment, historical circumstances and standard of living experienced by the people.

Projects are the mobilizers of the human resource. Quite often, projects bring individuals and companies together to complete a shared task. In most of these cases, the persons who come together are from various and different cultural backgrounds (Rees-Caldwell and Pinnington, 2013). Many authors have explored the impacts of cultures towards projects and project management systems but have frequently snubbed the internal influences on the people, which ensure project delivery. Meng (2012) argues that project delivery can be vastly affected the state of workmanship (whether poor or good). The human resource plays a vital role in the production of any project and any mismanagement of this resource cause various delays, cost overruns and other critical effects (Atkinson, 1999).

2.2 Cultural Models

Culture according to Hofstede (2005) can be portrayed through 3 layers of mental programming. The 3 layers are: Individual, Collective and Universal. Hofstede illustrated the theory by a pyramid as shown in Figure 1.

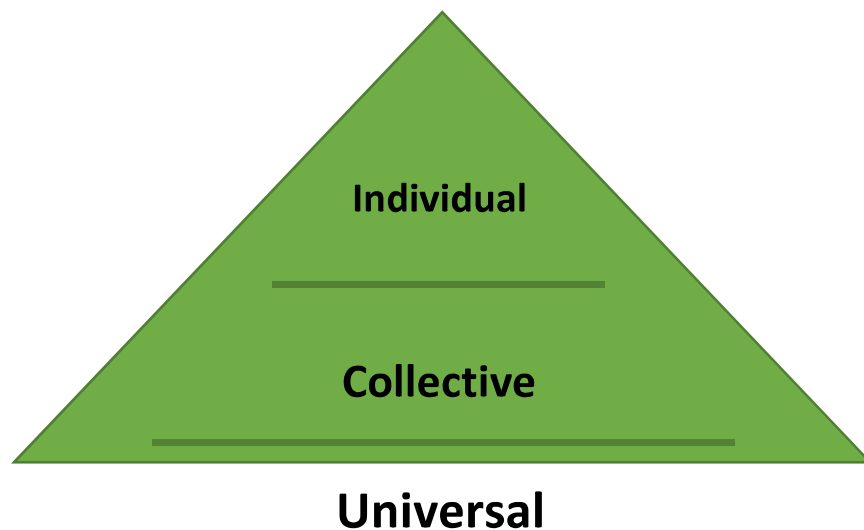


Figure 1: Hofstede's Levels of mental programming (Hofstede, 2005)

The theory of Hofstede Mental Programming entails that the Individual level is the exclusive personality which each person possesses. The Collective level is the obtaining of culture through learning from specific groups of people while the Universal level is about the inheritance of cultures through human nature such as survival instincts, etc. (Hofstede, 2005). Culture is separated through many notions which have become stereotypes to some groups of people. According to Gray and Larson (2003), it is “those notions that bind people together thereby establishing common identities amongst them”.

Edward Hall, in the year 1976, developed a rendition of culture in the Cultural Iceberg Model. This model shows that a vast percentage of an individual's culture is implicit and unseen while a minor proportion is explicit and observable. Hall (1976) Iceberg's Model is illustrated in Figure 2. Hall's research uncovered that the crucial aspects of culture in society are hidden beneath the explicit culture seen daily, and thus, cultural dimensions are learnt.

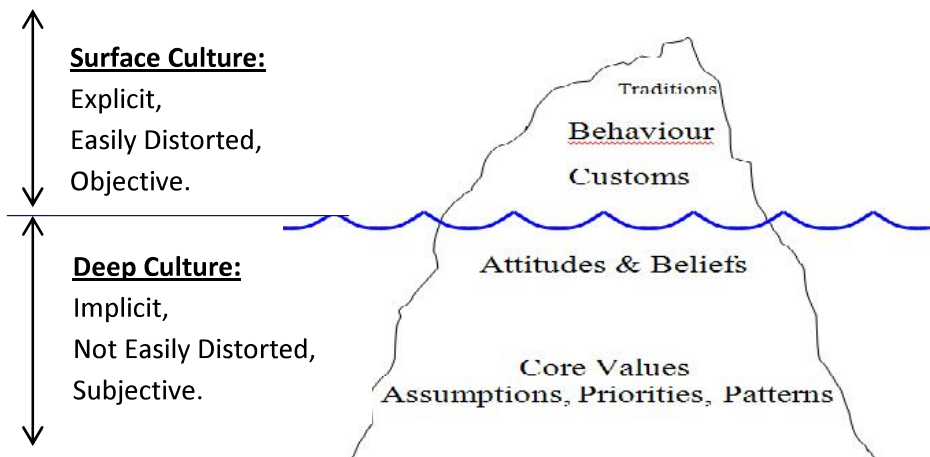


Figure 2: Edward Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model (Hall, 1976)

2.3 Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede (1984) shows that organisations are the biggest receptors of diverse cultures. Study by Goffee and Jones (1996) identifies four culture types which are found in an organisation, namely: Networked, Communal, Fragmented and Mercenary. In the research, two cultural dimensions which are Sociability and Solidarity were identified. Sociability has its root in the word social, and it means that the dimension has a lot of verbal, emotional and personal interaction whereby people share certain aspects of themselves. The value of this dimension is that the information is shared freely, there is a high sense of teamwork, and there is freedom of expression which tends to spark creativity in return. In contrast, Solidarity is much more formal and experienced in business setups. It renders a business relationship where one does what is required of them to achieve a goal. This form of cultural dimension is based solely on creating professional relationships designed to achieve a particular common purpose. This particularly shows that Network culture has high sociability and low solidarity, the Communal culture is high in sociability as well as solidarity. A Fragmented culture is low in both sociability and solidarity, and lastly, the Mercenary culture is high in solidarity and low in sociability.

Furthermore, Hofstede (1983) derived four organisational-related cultural dimensions. The initial dimension is Individualism vs. Collectivism which states that in an individualist societal system people are more selfish and look after their self-interests. In these societies, individuals were found having loose ties between one another. In contrast, the collective societal system promotes togetherness with much stronger links between the people. This phenomenon happens to such a degree that individuals pair themselves into unified groups (Hofstede, 1983). The second dimension is Power Distance which is the acceptance and expectance of power inequality. It shows that in an organisation there are powerful members and not so powerful members. This meant that people accepted and expected inequality in the way power was distributed. In an organisation, this occurs in the organisation structures and the positions

within the structures (Hofstede, 1983). The third dimension is Uncertainty avoidance. It measures people's tolerance for ambiguous situations. This, however, is not risk avoidance (Hofstede, 2011). Uncertainty avoidance is the level at which people are anxious and uncertain of unstructured situations apparent. By avoiding, people tend to develop stringent behavioural codes, laws and rules which become the norm (Hofstede, 1983). The fourth dimension Hofstede came up with was Masculinity vs. Femininity which is a societal aspect. It entails the division of genders in society whereby being a male is associated with masculinity and being a female is associated with being feminine. Nevertheless, a masculine society is one that values assertiveness, performance and accomplishments and a feminine society is one that's modest and values emotion and caring for others (Hofstede, 1983).

Hofstede later added to the four dimensions introducing the fifth and sixth dimensions. The fifth being Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation which shows how societies or organisations exhibit perseverance and a realistic future-oriented perspective on what the future may hold rather than portraying a conventional and historical point of view (Hofstede, 2011). Indulgence vs. Restraint focuses on people's state of happiness. This dimension shows the degree to which people possess/don't possess a natural desire to enjoy life and have fun. Indulgence as a characteristic expresses a sense of control of one's life, and restraint expresses strictness and a perception of being helpless. A Restrained person conforms to the norms of society, and everything else lies out of their control. (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions have been utilised from time to time to measure various aspects of businesses and their human resource, and each dimension has an index to which it is used as a scale in organisations to evaluate the factors of cultures which are impacting the organisation on a daily basis.

2.4 Relationship between cultural differences and project performance

There is sufficient evidence in Literature that suggests a link between the two in that the cultural factors such as the cultural dimensions can influence changes in behaviour and thus productivity of staff. Maphosa (2015) argue that cultural differences do have a significant influence on the way a project is executed. Ankrah (2007) further emphasised that the involvement of different cultures (cultural dimensions) towards project performance can result in various levels of performance encountered due to the unique nature of projects. Jin, Horii and Levitt (2004) found that 40% of projects with cultural problems show poor performance.

Cultures control people's thoughts, actions and behaviours therefore in multicultural teams within a construction project, people get to establish new relationships which can provide positive contributions to the project regarding knowledge sharing, innovation, alternative dispute resolutions, etc. Although, there must be thought and consideration for misunderstandings and other negative impacts of multicultural teams (Ogunsanya *et al.*, 2015). There may be resentments and aggression between the cultures which can impact productivity, efficiency and overall performance of the project.

Teams achieve construction project delivery through effective project management of cultural differences amongst other factors. Project delivery and cultural differences have a mutual relationship which is exposed in a study by Sumner and Slattery (2010) through team processes. Team processes constitute the cultural characteristics of a construction project team, and the processes manifest through the following: reliance (trusting one another in the team), communication, problem-Solving, gratitude and mutual Goals. Overall, a construction project primary internal operations are made up of the above team processes within the team. The relationship of the cultural differences can also affect the contract procedures that are in place

for the project. The following literature identifies the methods available to the construction industry to successfully manage cultural differences to complete the project.

2.5 The Management of Cultural Differences

2.5.1 Culture Caution and Awareness

Culture is increasingly becoming a critical issue on construction projects. The project management role requires a high level of professional expertise and awareness of the cultural influences and theories. Many construction companies are suffering from the plight of cultural differences affecting their projects (Jiang and Pretorius, 2011). An initial step to managing cultural differences is being aware of the cultures that exist in the company/ project, cultural similarities and differences and the issues which are affecting the culture at that moment.

2.5.2 Management and Teamwork

The successful completion of a construction project depends heavily on the effectiveness of the management systems in place. Evidently, the cultural differences encountered on every project have an effect on the system (Kivrak *et al.*, 2009). According to Kivrak *et al.* (2009) the management of cultural differences should vary by the nature of the project. Although, the authors also mentioned that maintaining good communication and building trust with workers is imperative. The management of projects is therefore very crucial. In a typical construction project, the top management would usually comprise of the Project Manager, who leads the projects along with other men who are co-managers. The co-managers form part of management as these have a contribution to the project and the decision-making.

2.5.3 Leadership style

Leadership styles are associated with the abilities of how people interrelate with the human resources from whom performance is expected. This includes the relations of Client-Project Manager, Project Manager- Co-managers, and Co-managers-employees. These leadership styles, according to Goetsch and Davis (2006), are autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, participative leadership, goal-oriented leadership, and situational leadership. The leadership styles mentioned above are easily influenced by culture as well as other macro-economic factors such as politics. According to Khumalo & Thwala (2009), the team leader must possess sound understanding and awareness of cultural differences to lead the team in a productive manner. Various cultural influences can impact on the choice of leadership style in construction projects.

3 Research Methodology

The Mixed method research explores the schools of thought of both the Qualitative research and the Quantitative research (Bryman and Bell, 2007). This approach came about as there was a need to fill up the gaps of one research method (i.e. Qualitative) with some aspects or tools from another research method (i.e. Quantitative). Creswell (2013) suggests that the mixed method is of transformative nature which tends to transform certain designs or approaches mostly from qualitative research to quantitative research. This study is of a social nature in that it aims to investigate cultural differences and its various influences on construction project delivery. Therefore, the mixed method design was adopted. The reason is that the study focuses how respondent in the real world view their environment and obtains observation of how the respondents feel about cultural differences and their influences to construction project delivery.

Sampling is a process of selecting a set of respondents who will act as representatives of the entire population. According to Fridah (2002), a population is a set of people, in this case, construction project professionals in the Gauteng province (N), which samples were drawn from for a measurement of an investigation. The notion is that the sample's data can be used to draw a conclusion about the population. According to the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) registrar, the number of active Building Contractors in Gauteng (Grades 7-9) are 199 (CIDB, 2015), while active Building Contractors in Johannesburg (Grades 5-9) are 52 (CIDB, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the contractors with a grade 7 status and above were used. Hence the target population is 199 contractors. The choice of contractors from grades 7-9 is because they are larger with more employees and the effect of cultural differences would tend to be more observable as opposed to Grades 1-6. This study used the non-probability sampling technique, particularly the convenience sampling due to the constraint of time and cost.

4 Findings and Discussion

Results shows that out of the 42 usable questionnaires returned, the respondents' demographics are 24% - Black, 26% - Colored, 24% - White and 12% either Indian or Asian. Likewise, 17% of the respondents were Construction project managers, 40% - Quantity Surveyors, 19% - Site Engineers, 19% - Foremen and 5% others. From the analysis of data, 66% of the respondents agree that different cultures in a project are more likely to create constructive relationships while 34% of the respondents think otherwise. Having identified through literature that the cultural dimensions experienced by multicultural project teams are diverse. Table 1 shows the ranking of the respondents of these cultural dimensions in Gauteng Province.

Table 1: Cultural Dimensions experienced in multicultural project teams

Cultural Dimensions experienced in multicultural project teams	MIS	SD	RANK
High Sociability	3.738	3.873	1
Masculinity	3.571	3.847	2
Power distance	3.333	3.578	3
Equality	3.310	2.966	4
Individualism	3.190	2.702	5
Avoidance	3.143	3.847	6
Collectivism	3.143	3.286	6
Indulgence	3.095	3.507	7
Low Sociability	3.000	3.507	8
Femininity	2.643	3.578	9

MIS = Mean Item Score; SD = Standard Deviation

Furthermore, based on the ranking using the mean item score (MIS) and the standard deviation (SD) for the findings suggest that the dominant cultural dimensions are: high sociability (MIS=3.378; SD=3.873; RANK=1), masculinity (MIS=3.571; SD=3.847; RANK=2), power (MIS=3.333; 3.578; RANK=3), equality (MIS=3.310; SD=2.966; RANK=4), individualism (MIS=3.190; SD=2.702; RANK=5).

The interview findings reveal that different cultures will bring about more interaction between the colleagues especially when there is a willingness to learn from one another. Contrary, other participants showed that culture can bring about conflicts and frustrations caused by power and

some people being above others. These findings are similar to the results of Goffee and Jones (1996), where a high sense of teamwork was experienced with the high sociability cultural dimension. The results are also in agreement with Hofstede's (1983) findings where masculinity, power distance and individualism were identified as some of the dimensions that regulate cultural relationships amongst people and teams. Furthermore, the findings show that equality is one of the major factors of cultures which influence relationships in construction projects. This is not in agreement with Hofstede's (1983) as this is related to power distance which implies that there always lies an expectance and acceptance of inequality within teams in a construction project. Table 2 below reveals the respondents ranking of the influences of cultural dimensions on a construction project.

Table 2: Influences of Cultural Dimensions

Influences of Cultural dimensions	MIS	SD	RANK
Causing irritation due to misunderstanding	3.476	3.782	1
Encouraging team building	3.476	3.715	1
Motivating workers to work hard	3.429	3.647	2
Encouraging strictness of management	3.381	3.286	3
Inspiring discipline among workers	3.333	3.912	4
Enhancing worker productivity	3.333	3.782	4
Creating mutual understanding	3.333	3.130	4
Enhancing commitment of workers	3.310	3.912	5
Improving the achievement status	3.310	2.966	5
Creating support and involvement in one anothers lives	3.286	3.847	6
Encouraging cooperation in the project team	3.167	4.219	7
Affecting emotional expressions	3.000	3.912	8
Improving ascribed status	2.857	3.847	9

MIS = Mean Item Score; SD = Standard Deviation

The influences of these cultural dimensions vary in many instances. The findings observed that the dominant influences are: causes irritation due to misunderstandings (MIS=3.476; SD=3.782; RANK=1), encourages team building (MIS=3.476; SD=3.715; RANK=1), motivates workers to work hard (MIS=3.429; SD=3.647; RANK=2), encouraging strictness of management (MIS=3.381; SD=3.286; RANK=3).

Interview findings show that the dominant influences are the misunderstandings and misconceptions as well as the demand for respect increases. Furthermore, there is also a sense of mutual understanding within the teams. These influences are closely related to the findings of Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997) of the cultural factors which influence the business industry, particularly the universalism vs. particularism and the internal vs. external control.

There is an alignment between the findings from the interviews and those from the questionnaire administered as is observable from the above. Thus, the interviews confirm the findings from the questionnaire survey. Having identified these factors effective management of cultural dimensions is suggested according to the identified options discussed earlier. Project Managers and industry practitioners will have to manage with culture awareness, team development process and adequate leadership styles that reflects the needs of the time.

5 Conclusion

The findings from this study showed that the cultural factors such as high sociability, masculinity and power were the top three cultural dimensions influencing people's cultures in the study environment. Furthermore, the influences of the cultural dimensions showed that the misunderstandings due to irritation, team building, motivation for hard work, strictness of management, inspiring of discipline to workers and the empowering of worker productivity were the top six influences of the cultural dimensions and people's individual cultures amongst construction workers in Gauteng.

The study concludes that the understanding of cultural differences on construction projects will lead to the improving of the understanding of different cultures, resolving conflicts efficiently, promoting mutual understanding on the project, promoting efficient transfer of knowledge throughout the whole project team, promoting the learning of new languages, alternative dispute resolution negotiations as well as negotiations of contracts in the projects.

It is therefore recommended that project managers and construction managers should be sensitive to note these cultural dimensions at play on their project teams and should also seek to meaningfully attenuate the negative influences of cultural dimensions while promoting its positive influence. It is also recommended that the use of appropriate leadership styles would help project managers in handling multicultural teams. Thus, study provides useful planning and management insight to managers and stakeholders in the construction industry towards the attainment of greater team effectiveness and project delivery.

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