

# THE EFFECTS OF NATIONAL CULTURE ON UNIONIZATION

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## Abstract

Trade unions are essentially social institutions and are not, just like every other institution, independent of the national culture of which they are a part. The four sub dimensions of Hofstede that constitute national culture are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and femininity/masculinity. All these sub dimensions have an impact on the system of all these industrial relations and thus on unionization, on the process of being a union member, the public perception of unionization, trade union participation, unionization rates, wage bargaining strategies, etc. Therefore, the introduction of national cultures by the State will enable positive recognition of industrial systems and unionization.

**Keywords:** *National culture, Unionization, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Femininity/Masculinity*

## ULUSAL KÜLTÜRÜN SENDİKALAŞMA ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİLERİ

### Özet

Sendikalar toplumsal kurumlardır ve her kurum gibi içinde buldukları toplumun ulusal kültüründen bağımsız değildir. Çalışmada ulusal kültür, Geert Hofstede'in ulusal kültür kavramsallaştırması bağlamında ele alınmaktadır. Hofstede'in ulusal kültürü oluşturan dört alt boyutu güç mesafesi, belirsizlikten kaçınma, bireycilik/kollektivizm ve dişil/eril kültürdür. Bütün bu alt boyutlar ülkelerdeki bütün bir endüstri ilişkiler sistemini ve dolayısıyla da sendikal örgütlenmeyi, sendikalaşmayı, sendikalara üye olma sürecini, sendikaların nasıl algılandığını, sendikal katılımı, sendikalaşma oranını, toplu pazarlık stratejilerini vs. etkilemektedir. Dolayısıyla da ülkelerin ulusal kültürlerinin ortaya konması endüstri sistemlerinin ve sendikal örgütlenmelerinin anlaşılmasına olanak sağlayacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Ulusal kültür, sendikal örgütlenme, sendikalaşma, güç mesafesi, belirsizlikten kaçınma, kollektivizm/bireycilik, dişil/eril kültür.*

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## **UNIONIZATION**

Trade unions are institutions of vital significance within the system of industrial relations. Unionization is an index of the tendency to and rate at which the work force can unionize. There are many political, social and economic factors that affect unionization. The political system and manner of administration in a country, without doubt, determine the existence, characteristics and free space of movement of trade unions. Moreover, the structure of the workforce, the level of industrialization, the characteristics and operation of trade unions, together with the number, qualities and sectorial distribution of workers in a country establish in general the rate and characteristics of unionization in that country (Mahiroğulları, 2001).

Culture plays a substantial role in establishing institutional structures. Different cultural organizations are based on differences in cultural beliefs (Greif, 1994). Even though trade unions are regarded as universal institutions, there are culture-specific unique differences. Trade unions are social institutions, which, together with their administrators and members, reflect the characteristics of the community within which it is located and it is those social and national cultural characteristics again that specify their activities. Social norms, values, beliefs, traditions and the whole process of socialization are important factors in the decision of an individual to become a union member (Fullager, 1995).

In a study by Black (2001), it was demonstrated that national culture has an impact on industrial relations and pay structures, such as centralization of collective bargaining, the extent of corporatism, the degree of coordination in bargaining, the extent of collective bargaining, trade union density, the arrangements for worker participation and the dimensions of the pay structure etc. The following researchers carried out studies on industrial relations in the following countries as a cultural phenomenon; Lipset (1995) in the USA, Crozier (1964) in France, and Gallie (1978) in France and England (Black, 2001).

Trade unions are also social structures. Those who have established, administered and maintained the trade unions are also members of the

public. Therefore, they reflect the characteristics of the society where they are located. National culture enables social transformation by impacting many institutions such as the education system, family and politics. Historical and social transformations establish the organization of labor and transform it through change. The changes in the process of labor, on the other hand, have an impact on unionization, participation in trade unions, the preferences of union membership and administrative styles in trade unions etc. (Mahiroğulları, 2001; Dereli, 1975; Ekin, 1989; Işıklı, 1995; Koray, 1994; Tokol, 2012).

## **NATIONAL CULTURE AND SUB-DIMENSIONS**

The national culture is the sum of norms, attitudes, beliefs and traditions dominant in a country. National culture, one of the sub-dimensions of culture, is not a people-oriented one that belongs only to one race, geography or a nation. What differentiates a certain community from another is social integrity with a historical and social background, that enables harmonious actions with a common reflex, and the forming of beliefs, thoughts and attitudes which then determine behaviors and actions.

One of the most comprehensive and well known studies conducted on the subject of national culture is that of Geert Hofstede. In 1980, Hofstede implemented the values scale (Value Survey Module- VSM) to 116,000 IBM workers in 40 countries including Turkey and introduced elements constituting the national culture based on the data obtained from that study. While doing this, Hofstede tried to define the culture that was the sub-dimension of national culture. According to Hofstede, culture is “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1980; 1997; 2001). The programming of the mind, according to Hofstede, develops in the early periods of one’s life and comprises the constituents of national culture due to social effects. According to the findings Hofstede obtained from the empirical study, there are four sub-dimensions constituting national culture: These are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and feminine/masculine cultures. These dimensions and the strategies to cope with them vary from society to society.

**Power Distance:**

Power distance, generally speaking, is related to how people perceive inequality in the distribution of power in a culture. The inequalities in government, authority and status are decisive in the inequality of society and this inequality allows inequality to exist and continue in many areas such as economic structures, social status, prestige and political structures (House, 2004; Hofstede, 2001). It is the extent to which the members of society accept that power is unequally distributed in organizations and institutions (Hofstede, 1984).

Power distance, together with what the weakest expects of inequality and the acceptance of inequality, is a national culture index that establishes the justification of authority by using the principle values of every culture (Hofstede, 2001). What is important in terms of the dimension of power distance is not the magnitude of inequality, but the dominant social values system, and this determines how the people in that society perceive inequality and how legitimately it is regarded and taken for granted or what is done to reduce this inequality as part of their discomfort in this situation. Trade unions came into existence because of this unequal structure in society, having been established to protect the rights of the weak against those in power. The attitude towards trade unions, participation and the rate of membership in every society is related to how workers feel about this inequality in the workplace and within the system of industrial relations, and how much they try to eliminate it.

Power distance varies from society to society. Accordingly, individuals in a society with low power distance try to keep this inequality to a minimum, are less tolerant of class differences, prefer democratic participation and are less fearful of going against the higher authority (superiors). In contrast, individuals in cultures where high power distance dominates, more easily embrace an unequal distribution of power and regard the differences in the pecking order as natural and believe that superiors have a right to privileges. Therefore, the value of a high power distance index is a sign of a national culture where subordinates have a high degree of loyalty to administrators. Thus, trade unions are expected to operate in cultures where there is a much lower power distance index. Although there may

be more power inequality in the hierarchy in high power distance, the distribution of power in such cultures is accepted to be normal. Therefore, where inequality is taken for granted in a society, unionization will also be low.

Power distance also enables the measurement of the degree of dependence in relations (Hofstede, 2001). The way people with less power perceive this inequality is also an indication of their dependence on authority. As inequality in the distribution of power increases, dependence also increases. If there is a prevailing belief that those in power have the right to it, inequality and dependence will not be regarded as a problem and therefore, no solutions will be sought. In societies where power distance is high, there is also greater dependence, which means a low rate of unionization and assertion of individual rights.

While the prevailing view in high power distance societies is the dependence of the weak on the powerful, in societies where there is low power distance, this dependence tends towards an interdependence between the weak and the powerful and the dominant view is that this is how it should be. Centralism remains at the forefront in high power distance and an autocratic sense of rule is dominant with administrators seen as benevolent and avuncular. The decisions of those in power, rather than rational and permanent rules, are normally implemented. The idea that those in power should also be economically better off is the prevailing view. While taking decisions, the subordinates expect those in power to tell them what to do (Hofstede, 1997). In societies where high power distance is dominant, people in workplaces generally behave irrationally. Therefore, joining a trade union rationally may be perceived as letting down or betraying the employer. A centralist and autocratic structure and administration does not tolerate unionization. Moreover, the subordinates in cultures with high power distance are dependent upon the administrators and expect to receive orders from them on how to behave. Business activities are carried out based on a chain of command rather than individual production and creativity. In such a structure, the employees cannot be expected to join trade unions.

The primary objective of trade unions is to affect the decisions of employers and minimize the power distance between the employees and the administration. While doing this, trade unions aim at reducing the power inequality and power distance between the employer and the employee and even the political administration. This can only be possible by increasing the number of trade union members. However, only increasing the number of members is not sufficient to enable this. Thus, in countries where union participation and membership is low and unionization is unsuccessful, the power distance is also expected to be high because individuals in countries where power distance is high naturally take the unequal distribution of power for granted and accepted it. Inequality is expected and even a desirable consequence (Hofstede, 1997). Therefore, in order to have a say in the decision-making mechanism, they do not consider sharing the power or reducing the power distance by defending their rights. Under these circumstances, it is possible to say that power distance has a negative relationship with unionization (Posthuma, 2009). Given the way unions operate and their structure, in societies where power distance is high, participation in centralized bargaining and corporatist or co-ordinated arrangements will be low (Black, 2001).

### **Uncertainty Avoidance:**

The uncertainty avoidance index demonstrates stress about an uncertain future in a society and the level of dealing with it (Hofstede, 2002). To what extent society feels itself under threat under uncertain conditions determines the uncertainty avoidance index. The strategies developed in order to deal with this unpredictability and uncertainties vary from culture to culture. Technology, regulations and religions are also tools which are used to avoid uncertainty and to deal with unpredictability (Hofstede, 1985).

The level of uncertainty avoidance is related to the extent that individuals with a certain level of culture feel themselves at ease and secure when faced with uncertain circumstances. What is decisive here, as is the case with the other dimensions of Hofstede, is how those with a common cultural level perceive it and how they form their values. The criterion is

not what the situation really is but how it is perceived. One of the reasons for the existence of trade unions is, without a doubt, to regulate employee/ employer relations within certain rational rules by getting out of a system of uncertain, unpredictable and irrational industrial relations. It is one of the union objectives to minimize uncertainty and secure the maintenance of the system in a safe way. Therefore, in a culture where uncertainty avoidance is high, unionization is not expected to be high either.

People in cultures where the uncertainty avoidance index is high feel a greater need for written and verbal rules in order to avoid uncertainty. They presume that they will be able to overcome the uncertainty by establishing fixed systems, developing formal rules and being loyal to legislations. In cultures where uncertainty avoidance is low, people feel more at ease and secure, there is more tolerance and they are more flexible and open-minded about behaviors and ideas different from their own. The inclusion of trade unions in the process of contracting, bargaining and decision making should be within the framework of certain legislations. The trade unions have their own written rules and organizational cultures. All these rescue trade union activities from uncertainty by rationalizing them. Union members have the belief that their rights will be secured under rational written rules.

While uncertainty in cultures where the uncertainty avoidance index is high is considered threatening and dangerous, in cultures where it is low, uncertainty is perceived as a regular feature. In cultures that demonstrate high uncertainty avoidance, the level of stress is high. Innovations are always confronted with resistance, so given the fact that every innovation will generate uncertainty, a conservative attitude is exhibited. There are too much strict rules and little flexibility or tolerance. When faced with a situation where rules are violated, it is believed that it is the situation, not the rules that need to be improved. There is an inflexible structuring. However, in cultures where there is low uncertainty avoidance, the opposite case is seen. While what secures the motivation is security in cultures where there is high uncertainty avoidance, it is the motivation itself that secures success in cultures where there is low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1997).

The trade unions may be regarded by their members as institutions that protect them from uncertainty. They are considered as a mediatory institution that will defend the rights of their members in the face of problems encountered in the workplace, against the administrators or the employers or even problems with the government and the laws, and communicate their wishes to the relevant authorities, and reduce conflicts. Therefore, they are expected to eliminate uncertainties by defending the rights of the group.

Job security is, without a doubt, one of the main reasons why people experience uncertainty. One of the major reasons for joining a trade union is the idea of avoiding uncertainty by providing job security. Moreover, the functions of trade unions such as increasing wages, collective bargaining and industrial actions are important in eliminating uncertainty. In that case, in societies where uncertainty avoidance is high, unionization is expected to be high as well.

On the other hand, given the way the trade unions operate and their structure, in societies where uncertainty avoidance is high, there will be higher participation in the coordination of corporatism, centralization and fixing wages (Black, 2001).

### **Collectivism / Individualism:**

This dimension of the culture is concerned with identity problems and tries to establish how the members of that culture perceive and identify themselves (Hofstede, 2001). In cultures where individual objectives are prioritized, individuals are valued as persons, and where individual identity is preferred over group identity, are regarded as individualistic cultures. In collectivist, that is communitarian, cultures, on the other hand, the group that one belongs to rather than the individual is significant and valued. The individuals in societies where there is a collectivist culture put the success of the group before that of their own personal objectives and (Triandis, 2002). While what determines the attitudes in collectivist cultures are the norms and rules, people in individualistic cultures prefer to take their own decisions (Triandis, 1998).



Unionization is certainly a characteristic of collectivist societies. Unionization is a collectivist action and the interests of the group rather than the individual are valued and defended. Instead of behaving individually, an effort is made to earn employees' rights based on the decisions of a trade union. The decisions are implemented not individually but based on the trade union.

Individualism exists in a society where the relationships amongst the individuals are loose. In societies where individualism is high, the individuals are expected first to look after themselves and then their immediate families. Collectivism, on the other hand, designates a society where people integrate into a group from birth in a powerful and harmonious way and which continues to protect them throughout their life time with the people's unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 2001). There is also a sentimental loyalty (dependence) to the group. The objectives and rules of the group prevail. There is a dominant idea that the group provides security and protection for the individuals. In collectivist cultures, the individuals are expected to look after their family members faithfully and put group interests before their individual achievements. Therefore, it possible to conclude in theory that individualistic societies are distant from collectivist actions and there will be less union participation.

The values of a high individualistic index are a sign that individualism is highly tolerated and even encouraged in that culture. Competitiveness and ambitions are encouraged in such cultures. The requirements of individuals, the achievement of their goals and their personal achievements are put before those of the society. In such a case, it is thought that individuals in an individualistic culture tend to bargain with the employer on an individual basis in order to protect their own interests since they think that trying for the interest of the group may result in damage to their self-interests.

Individualism/collectivism is one of the basic social norms for Hofstede. It has an impact on both the mental programming of people and the actions and functions of social institutions (such as family, education, religion and politics) and the shaping of the family (Hofstede, 1984). The individualism/collectivism index is one of the principal dimensions of social culture, thus of the national culture, and a deciding factor for society. It is one of

the most significant factors which determines the structure of society and establishes whether the group or individual will be used as the basis of a principal deciding unit of the society.

While identity is linked to the individual in individualistic cultures, the identity in communitarian cultures is linked to the social group. The idea of “me” is significant and valued in individualistic cultures. In collectivist cultures, on the hand, the idea of “us” prevails; the whole idea is the existence and continuation of the group. What really matters in individualistic cultures is the individual and the individualistic interests are protected in their decisions; who needs to be managed is again the individual. However, in communitarian cultures, since the objective is the continuation of the group, decisions are taken aimed at preserving harmony and eliminating conflicts amongst the group members; what needs to be managed is not the individual, but the group. What determines the hierarchical relationships in individualistic cultures is the reciprocal interest of the individuals. The relationship between the employer and the employee is based on rational and written rules and contracts. In collectivist cultures, on the other hand, there is an ethical relationship between the employer and the employee and the written rules are no more than formalities; what really matters is the relationships between the individuals. There is a similar relationship dominant in the issues of employment and promotion. Employment and promotion in individualistic cultures are based on ability and rules; in communitarian cultures, on the other hand, it is based on the group and the norms of the group. Moreover, while duties in individualistic cultures are more important than relationships, the relationships in collectivist cultures are superior to duties (Hofstede, 1997).

Collective action is certainly a reason for the existence of trade unions. In collectivist cultures where the aims and interests of the group are based, the idea of “us” prevails and they operate for the existence and continuation of the group, meeting the right criteria for unionization. Therefore, in countries where collectivism is high, unionization is expected to be high. However, in the three studies done by Black (2001), Singh (2001) and Posthuma (2009), interestingly no significant correlation was found between collectivism and unionization.

National culture is important not only for union participation and membership, but it is also decisive for their structure and operational. According to Hofstede, what differentiates individualistic cultures from others are the extremely atomized worker trade unions. These are the craft unions that are continually in competition with each other and are quite far removed from organized united industrial actions. The dimension of individualism in this case, too, is linked to the fact of centralization, corporatism and coordination being at a low level (Black, 2001).

### **Femininity / Masculinity:**

The basic problem of the fourth dimension is combined in the gender roles as a cultural diversity. Both of these dimensions are concerned more with social rather than biological and with the social gender roles rather than gender-based differentiation (Hofstede, 2001). The dimension of femininity against masculinity is described as “it is related with emotional role differences between men and women”. The studies carried out so far have demonstrated that what lies behind the demands of different role distribution between women and men is achievement (success) rather than the living standards expected of the society. Hofstede (2001) defines the roles as follows: in societies where masculinity is dominant, the gender roles are distinctively clear. It is expected that men are tough, assertive and tangibly success-oriented, whereas women are humble, sensitive and concerned more with higher standards of living. In femininity, on the other hand, both men and women are expected to be humble, sensitive and concerned more with higher standards of living.

Masculinity and femininity are the terms used to identify the dominant values in society. That is to say, the cultures where the values related to money and materialism are dominant, where heroism and self-confidence prevail, and where there are assertive, aggressive, tough and entrepreneurial are related to masculinity, and cultures where there are concerns of looking after others and standards of living are related to femininity (Hofstede, 1993).

High masculinity index values indicate that the differences between the gender roles in that national culture are high. While the cultures where masculinity scores are high tend to be dominantly competitive, assertive, materialistic, attaining and aggressive, the feminine cultures where there are low masculinity scores are humble, nurturing, high living standards-oriented and attaining. Moreover, these cultures also emphasize justice, competitiveness and performance. While an administrator in a masculine society eliminates conflicts by fighting against them, the solutions of problems in a feminine culture are achieved through negotiations and reconciliations (Hofstede, 1984).

People in masculine cultures live to work; life is for working, money and work are important; self-confidence, passion, justice, performance, competitiveness and power are the dominant values. In the feminine cultures, on the other hand, people work to live; people and sincere relationships are important, modesty, standard of living, solidarity and equality are emphasized. While conflicts in masculine cultures are resolved through debate, they are resolved through negotiation and reconciliation in feminine cultures (Hofstede, 1997). Based on all these explications, it is expected that unionization is needed more in masculine cultures. However, in masculine societies where conflicts are resolved through debates, working cooperatively in the workplace is quite low. Therefore, union membership in masculine societies will also be low. The industrial relations system based on negotiations and reconciliations in feminine cultures is also expected to provide an atmosphere conducive to unionization. Given the structure and the way trade unions operate, in societies where masculinity is high, it is expected that across the centralized economy, there will be a low tendency for collective bargaining and participation in corporate regulations (Black, 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

If the culture is the collective programming of the mind which determines the perception, action, attitude, belief, norm and values, it will also undoubtedly have a great impact on trade unions. Both the trade unions and their members cannot avoid the characteristics of the culture within the system of industrial relations in which they operate.

The environment in which they operate has an impact on how trade unions are perceived. Institutions in different national cultures and different contexts operate differently. National cultures, on the other hand, have an impact on how individuals perceive the institutions and react to them. Trade unions as institutions are also affected by the national cultures in terms of their structure and activities (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001 cited in: Posthuma, 2009). For example, union participation also varies across cultures. While it is considered as a matter of free will in some countries, it may exist as an instrument of pressure of the employers or political institutions in some others (Olson, 1971 cited in Posthuma, 2009). This determines the perspective, membership and participation of the trade unions.

While the cultures of the societies in which people live, determine the quantity and quality of union membership, the issues such as union participation, union administration, hierarchical structures in unions and the decision making mechanisms, efficiency of trade unions, their styles of operation, conflict management are also influential. The social structure in which the trade unions operate determines how the trade unions are perceived; it is because the national culture determines the society, that society has an impact on the trade unions and the trade unions affect the individuals. Therefore, different unionizations are encountered in every country.

Researching and understanding the impact of national culture on trade unions will provide valuable data to compensate for deficiencies in the laws or practices on a national basis, eliminating problems, deciding on revisions and innovations to be implemented, determining the position of the country in an international context and taking decisions at a global level.

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