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Edel Conway
Kathy Monks
Finian Buckley
Jeff Bagram
Brendan Barrister

The Learning, Innovation and Knowledge Research Centre
DCU Business School
Dublin City University
Glasnevin
Dublin 9
Ireland

link.dcu.ie

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Developing Behavioural Complexity among Global Leaders: An International, Cross-continental Study

EDEL CONWAY
KATHY MONKS
FINIAN BUCKLEY
JEFF BAGRAM
BRENDAN BARRISTER

ABSTRACT

Research evidence exists which indicates that the degree to which managers can develop behavioural complexity is linked to more effective leadership and higher firm performance. Behavioural complexity relates to the capacity for managers or leaders to engage in a wide repertoire of behaviours which will enable them to both maintain continuity and lead change. This paper sets out to explore differences in behavioural complexity among managers across different international contexts and across genders. It examines managers' perceptions of how they relate to people, manage processes, lead change and produce results (i.e. their behavioural complexity). The research forms part of a wider investigation into the impact of management education on individual and organisational outcomes. It draws on a survey of managers from three countries and a variety of organisational settings (N= 286). The findings show that there are differences in behavioural complexity both across genders and across international contexts. Specifically, it finds evidence to suggest that female managers adopt a stronger internal focus (i.e. on managing processes), compared to males who adopt a stronger external focus (e.g. on producing results). In addition, the findings indicate that scores along the 'relating to people' dimension are significantly lower among managers in the US, compared to the other managers in the sample.

Key Words: Behavioural Complexity; Global Leadership; Management Development

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Contact: edel.conway@dcu.ie

INTRODUCTION

Research has identified management development as a key resource within organisations which firms need to understand and support in order to create sustainable competitive advantage (Mabey, 2002). Yet, little attention has focused on understanding the issues that influence the development of behaviourally complex managers, particularly in an international context. This paper sets out to explore whether there is evidence that behavioural complexity is present to the same degree across different international contexts, and whether it varies according to gender. It examines variations in the degree to which managers relate to people, manage processes, lead change and produce results (i.e. their behavioural complexity) across three countries: Ireland, USA and South Africa.

LEADERSHIP AND BEHAVIOURAL COMPLEXITY

The Nature of Leadership

There exists an extensive body of literature on the nature of leadership in organisations and there is considerable debate about leadership styles (Thompson, 2000). Most theories on leadership can be classified according to three perspectives: trait, behavioural and contingency (Kayworth and Leidner, 2002; McWhinney, 1997). The trait perspective posits that the characteristics and qualities of effective leaders are innate. In this respect, leaders are "born" and not "made". While this approach has had some popularity, it has been criticised on the grounds that it fails to take into account either actual behaviours or the degree to which leadership behaviour is contingent on other factors (Bass, 1990). In contrast, the behavioural perspective focuses on the actual behaviours of effective leaders and seeks to identify typologies or "ideal" leadership styles (Vera and Crossan, 2004). The major criticism of this perspective is that it is simplistic, and assumes a "one size fits all" approach. The contingency perspective posits that the leadership style adopted is dependent on a number of factors pertaining to different situations and organisational contexts. However, critics of this approach argue that it fails to consider that multiple styles and behaviours might be required and adopted depending on the circumstances. Hooijberg et al. (1997) argue that "most leaders interact almost simultaneously with a variety of stakeholders in multiple and rapidly changing settings covering a virtually endless list of contingencies" (p. 376). They argue that leaders need to develop what they term "behavioural complexity".

Behavioural Complexity

Behavioural complexity can be defined as the capacity for managers or leaders to engage in a wide repertoire of behaviours, which will enable them to both maintain continuity and lead change (Hooijberg and Quinn, 1992). Specifically, it concerns the ability to "exhibit contrary or opposing behaviours while still retaining some measure of integrity, credibility and direction" (Denison et al., 1995:526). For example,

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managers may be required to manage both people and processes, and will also be expected to lead change and produce results. A high level of behavioural complexity enables a manager to draw on a wide repertoire of behaviours to meet such competing demands effectively. These opposing behaviours may be categorised using the dimensions of the Competing Values Framework (Quinn, 1984; 1988). In particular, two pairs of contrasting values or capabilities define the behavioural breadth within which a manager might act. The first concerns organisational focus, which may reflect either an internal/ people-oriented focus or an external/ organisational one. The second reflects an emphasis on stability or flexibility in the organisational structure. Thus, a behaviourally complex leader "transcends" the paradox of results versus relationships, and continuity versus change. As Lawrence et al. (2003: 5) point out:

> Managers are expected to do such things as encourage hard work, emphasise speed, and focus on competition in order to produce results. At the same time, there is an expectation that a manager should maintain relationships by showing concerns for the needs of others, encouraging participation, and assisting others in their career development.

The paradoxes that depict these opposing behaviours are illustrated in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

There is increasing support for the view that performance represents a number of clearly distinguishable components, where individuals may perform well in one component but not on others (Campbell, 1994). Research evidence exists which supports the view that managers who perform multiple leadership roles score higher on leadership effectiveness than those who do not (e.g. Dennison et al., 1995; Zaccaro, 2001). There is also evidence linking more effective leadership to higher financial performance (Denison et al., 1995; Hooijberg, 1996). However, there is the view that extremely under-developed or over-developed behavioural complexity can lead to poor performance and damaged reputations (Petrick et al., 1999). In the context of developing behaviourally complex global leaders, Petrick et al. (1999) argue that building a reputation that relies heavily on any one of these four dimensions will lead to undesirable consequences. For example, in their view extreme procedural rigidity will diminish innovation, while extreme innovation will disrupt continuity, and an extreme focus on employee morale will slow down productivity. As business environments become increasingly global, managers must develop skills to interact effectively with culturally complex people in culturally complex situations (Friedman and Antal, 2005). Yet little is known about the factors that influence the development of behavioural complexity among managers and there has been no research exploring gender or international differences in its development.

Leadership and Gender

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For more than thirty years, researchers have explored the degree to which leadership styles vary according to gender. The findings are somewhat mixed (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen, 2003) and Butterfield and Grinnel (1999) conclude that "overall, this area of enquiry has been hotly contested" (p. 225). Eagly (1987) identifies two types of qualities associated with gender. "Communal" qualities represent a concern for the welfare of others and includes dimensions such helpfulness, awareness of others' feelings and emotional expressiveness. "Agentic" qualities are associated with assertive, goal directed behaviour, and include directness, independence and self-reliance. A number of studies suggest that, in general, females are characterised by communal qualities, while males are characterised by agentic qualities. In a meta-analytic review of 162 studies investigating gender and leadership (Eagly and Johnson 1990), the authors conclude: "the strongest evidence we obtained for a sex difference in leadership style occurred in the tendency for women to adopt a more democratic or participative style and for men to adopt a more autocratic or directive style" (p. 255). Eagly et al. (1995) found no differences in leadership effectiveness between men and women. However, men were more effective when their roles were defined in more masculine terms, and women when their roles were less masculine. In another study, Cooper (1997) found that women rated their level of influence lower to men, and also devalued their leadership accomplishments, taking less credit for successful achievements. These findings thus demonstrate the importance of considering gender differences in leadership style.

Leadership in an International Context

A number of significant changes have taken place in business environments which highlight the importance of understanding differences between cultures. Such changes include: the increasing diversity of the labour force, the shift from local to international markets, the increase in mergers and acquisitions among multi-national corporations, organisational restructuring across national boundaries, and the increasing numbers of females entering the workforce (Gibson, 1995). A key finding from research exploring differences between cultures is that the physical boundaries which separate countries often do not indicate differences between their cultures. In a review of the literature on leadership behaviour across countries, Triandis (1993) found that leadership tended to be quite similar across similar countries, but that the emphasis tended to shift depending on cultural value orientations. Hofstede's (2001) seminal framework suggests that it is possible to identify clusters of countries where organisational and management practices are similar.

Summary

This review of the literature has revealed that it is would be useful to extend current understandings of behavioural complexity to consider the impact of both gender and international context. An increased understanding regarding these issues will have

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implications for the extent to which effective managers can be developed both within and across these national boundaries.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Background to the Study

The research forms part of an international study exploring the impact of management education on both individuals and their organisations in four countries: Ireland, South Africa, Australia and the USA. The study utilises a self-report questionnaire that is designed to capture changes along a number of dimensions among managers undertaking postgraduate qualifications. As part of the research, participants are asked to give a copy of a similar questionnaire to two work colleagues and to their managers. The aim of including their colleagues is to provide a control group of individuals who are not currently attending an education process. The managers are included in order to provide a crosscheck on the self-report process while also providing insights into whether or not any change at an individual level has an impact within the organisation.

Sample

This paper is based on data drawn from the wider study and includes a convenience sample of managers from three countries in the study. Between 2003 and 2005, questionnaires were completed by a sample of managers in Ireland, the US and South Africa. Only management respondents from the student and colleague samples of the wider research project are included in the present study (N = 286). The country breakdown of managers is as follows: Ireland (N = 118), US (N = 43), and South Africa (N =125). We recognise that the US sample size to date is small, and data collection there is ongoing. The gender breakdown of the sample is provided in Table2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Measures

Behavioural complexity was measured using an instrument devised by Quinn and his colleagues (Lawrence et al. 2003). The instrument comprises 36 items that form four factors, with three sub-scales included in each. This measure is designed for both self-evaluation and for evaluation by colleagues. For the self-evaluation version, the phrase “I would describe myself as being skilled in the following…” appears at the top of the page. Each item is rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) and items are randomised so that constructs are not grouped together. The scale comprises four broad dimensions of behavioural complexity, each with three sub-dimensions. These dimensions are as follows: relating to people (encouraging participation, developing people, acknowledging personal needs),

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leading change (anticipating customer needs, initiating significant change, inspiring people to exceed expectations), managing processes (clarifying policies, expecting accurate work, controlling projects), and producing results (focusing on competition, showing a hard work ethic and emphasizing speed).

The reliabilities for the behavioural complexity scale for the entire sample, and for each country, are presented in Table 3. The reliabilities for the four main dimensions are satisfactory, all exceeding the recommended .70. Similar satisfactory reliabilities are found for the sub-scales, though in some cases a more lenient cut-off of .60 is needed. The analysis of reliabilities for the US sample, in particular, has presented some difficulty for the researchers. We suspect that this is due to the small sample size. Due to poor reliabilities in some of the sub-scales for this sample, five items were removed (the details will not be reported here). We do, however, need to draw particular attention to the following: the "acknowledging personal needs" alpha for the entire sample and the US sample, and the "showing a hard work ethic" and "emphasising speed" alphas for the South African sample. We advise caution in interpreting findings regarding these sub-scales.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

FINDINGS

Tables 4 and 5 present the means for each of the behavioural complexity variables across the three countries and across genders.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

[Insert Table 5 about here]

A MANOVA test was performed to investigate differences across the dimensions of behavioural complexity simultaneously according to country and gender. The first analysis included only the four broad dimensions and found a significant main effect for gender ($F = 3.191$, Wilks' Lambda = .947, $p < .05$), but not for country or the gender x country interaction. This suggests that males score more highly than females across most dimensions, with the exception of 'managing processes' ($F = 4.467$, $p < .05$). A closer examination of the means indicates that females (Mean = 3.93, SD = .57) score more highly along this dimension when compared to males (Mean = 3.86, SD = .52). A further t-test exploring the differences according to gender revealed one additional significant difference with respect to 'producing results' ($t = 2.202$, $p < .05$). The means indicate that males (Mean = 3.79, SD = .46) score higher on this dimension when compared to females (Mean = 3.63, SD = .54).

Analysis of each variable separately revealed country differences along the 'relating to people' dimension ($F = 4.448$, $p < .05$). Examination of the means shows that this dimension is considerably lower among US managers, particularly when

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compared to South African managers. Finally, the MANOVA test revealed one significant gender x country difference with respect to 'producing results' ($F = 4.705$, $p < .05$). An examination of the means suggests that for the US sample, males score more highly on this dimension compared to females. However, the means also indicate that females in the US have higher scores along this dimension (Mean = 3.92), compared to females in Ireland (Mean = 3.57) or South Africa (3.57).

To explore the possible effects of the gender and country variables further, a series of univariate F tests across each of the four variables were carried out. This analysis found significant country x gender effects with respect to the 'leading change', and 'producing results' dimensions. In addition, a significant main effect was found for gender with respect to the 'managing processes' dimension (as identified in the earlier analysis). The mean scores presented in Table 5 suggest that males in the US score significantly lower ($F = 3.388$, $p < .05$) on the 'managing processes' dimension than their counterparts in the other two countries. It is also indicated that females in the US score significantly higher on the 'leading change' ($F = 3.494$, $p < .05$) and 'producing results' dimensions, when compared to females in the other two countries.

A second MANOVA included the 12 smaller dimensions of behavioural complexity. This analysis found that the overall model was significant for country ($F = 1.719$, $p < .05$, Wilks' Lambda = .831). The variable 'developing people' (related to the broader 'relating to people') dimension was found to differ significantly between the three countries ($F = 6.603$, $p < .01$). A closer examination of the means shows that the US sample display considerably lower mean scores for this variable, particularly when compared to the South African sample. In addition, the means for 'expecting accurate work' (related to the leading change) are significantly higher among the South African managers ($F = 3.121$, $p < .046$), when compared to the other managers in the sample.

This analysis also found significant main effects for gender ($F = 2.535$, $P < .01$, Wilks' Lambda = .875) and gender x nationality ($F = 1.597$, $p < .05$, Wilks' Lambda = .842). The means suggest that the 'controlling projects' dimension (managing processes) is rated significantly higher ($F = 3.953$, $SD < .05$) among females (Mean = 3.73, SD = .80) compared to males (Mean = 3.61, SD = .67), while the 'focusing on competition' (producing results) dimension is rated more highly ($F = 5.083$, $p < .05$) by males (Mean = 3.68, SD = .65) than females (Mean = 3.31, SD = .77). In addition, the 'clarifying policies' dimension (managing processes) is rated significantly higher ($F = 9.413$, $p < .01$) for females (Mean = 3.99) compared to males (Mean = 3.84).

There were also significant gender x country effects related to 'developing people' ($F = 3.199$, $p < .05$) and 'emphasizing speed' ($F = 3.705$, $p < .05$). A look at the means for these variables indicates that US males score significantly lower along the clarifying policies dimension (Mean = 3.52), compared to South African (Mean = 3.94) and Irish (Mean = 3.81) managers. Regarding the 'emphasising speed' dimension, it appears that Irish females (Mean = 3.56) score lower on this variable compared to US (Mean = 4.25) and South African (Mean = 3.70) females.

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A series of univariate F tests explored further differences among the dimensions and country and gender. The significant findings are reported in Table 6.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

These findings indicate that scores among US females regarding encouraging participation are higher, particularly when compared to females in South Africa ($F = 3.253$, $P < .05$). Scores for developing people among US males are lower compared to South African males ($F = 3.997$, $p < .05$). Scores regarding initiating significant change are lower among South African females compared to US females ($F = 3.201$, $P < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The utilisation of Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of cultural value orientations in the three countries represented in the sample represents one way by which to explore differences in behavioural complexity that emerged across both gender and nationality. A summary of Hofstede's dimensions for the three countries in the sample is provided in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Hofstede's dimensions provide the basis for both within and across country comparisons in relating behavioural complexity to different cultural orientations. For example, high scores on the individualist dimension depicts a culture where there is high concern for self over others, and the development of looser relationships compared to those associated with more collectivist cultures. Such a focus on individualism perhaps explains the apparent preference among the US population for 'producing results' (females) and their lower scores in 'relating to people' (males) when compared with the other two countries. However, the other results are less easy to explain. Thus, as there are generally lower levels of uncertainty avoidance in the three countries compared with other dimensions, it would have perhaps been expected that the scores for 'managing change' would have been higher.

In relation to masculinity, the Hofstede model indicates high scores for all three countries. In such countries, gender differentiation is more likely and this is borne out by the results with a significant effect for gender emerging across all the four main dimensions of behavioural complexity. There is also evidence to suggest that females score significantly higher on the 'managing processes' dimension, but that males score higher for 'producing results'. This is perhaps due to the high masculinity scores associated with all three countries, where there is a focus on achievement on results.

The findings also suggest that females adopt a stronger internal focus, while males are more concerned with an external focus (Table 1). The focus on producing results and on leading change was stronger for female US managers, when compared to those

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in Ireland and South Africa. Thus, female managers in the US also tend to adopt a stronger external focus, compared to other female managers in the sample. Again, the high individualist culture, coupled with high masculinity in the US might explain this finding.

The findings on gender can also be considered in the light of extensive research on gender differences in leadership and the implications of these differences for the failure of women to reach top management positions. The differences reported in relation to behavioural complexity between men and women confirm studies that show gender-based differences in leadership style (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Eagly et al. 2003). While studies have failed to find that such differences result in less effective leadership, it is the case that men are deemed to be more effective when their roles are defined in masculine terms and women when their roles are less masculine (Eagly et al. 1995). Extending this argument to the notion of behavioural complexity, the case could be made that the greater representation of men at senior management levels is likely to have encouraged organisational cultures that support and reinforce a leadership style of 'producing results'. Thus women whose preferred strengths lie in 'managing processes' may find it difficult to convince promotion boards that such a style will be successful. Research in the USA has indicated that the greatest barrier to women's progression to senior management positions is their lack of general management or line experience (Wellington et al., 2003). This suggests that there may be a vicious circle emerging as experience in 'producing results' is most likely to emerge from line management responsibilities, but that women generally lack this type of experience.

Overall, however, the scores for the entire sample are higher along the internal dimensions (relating to people and managing processes), than the external ones (leading change and producing results) across the entire sample. Thus managers do not display these dimensions to a consistently high degree. In particular, the focus on leading change and producing results is lower across males and females in all countries. However, since an external focus may be key to enhanced organisational performance, it may be the case that organisations need to ensure that management development programmes focus on nurturing a greater external focus.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reported on the preliminary findings of an international study that is examining managerial competencies. The findings provide interesting insights into both cultural and gender differences related to behavioural complexity, which extend our understanding of the concept. However, a number of limitations to the research should be noted. One such limitation is that all variables were primarily examined using self-report measures. This raises the possibility that relationships found among the variables investigated reflect shared response bias or are exposed to common method variance. In addition, the sample size for the US managers is currently quite small and it is possible that conclusions about trends that were apparent in this data

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may change as the sample size is increased. This is, though, work in progress and the next stage of the research will explore whether behavioural complexity changes as a result of managers' attendance at management education programmes. This should provide interesting insights into the ways in which the education of experienced managers might be conducted.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Behavioural Complexity in the Competing Values Framework

	Internal Focus	External Focus
Flexible Structure	**Relationships** Relating to People	**Change** Leading Change
Stable Structure	**Continuity** Managing Processes	**Results** Producing Results

Source: Lawrence et al. (2003)

Table 2: Gender breakdown of the sample

	Ireland *N (%)*	*US* *N (%)*	*South Africa* *N (%)*
Male	70 (60%)	23 (53%)	95 (76%)
Female	47 (40%)	20 (47%)	30 (24%)
Total	**117**	**43**	**125**

Table 3: Reliabilities for the main and sub-dimensions of the behavioural complexity measure

Scales/ Factors	*Lawrence et al, 2003*	*Total Sample*	*Ireland*	*USA*	*South Africa*
1. Relating to People:					
- Encouraging participation	.69	.72	.72	.69	.72
- Developing people	.72	.71	.71	.71	.70
- Acknowledging personal needs	.68	.40	.62	.48	.66
Total Reliability for Factor		.70	.79	.78	.79
2. Leading Change					
- Anticipating customer needs	.75	.67	.73	.71	.61
- Initiating significant change	.83	.67	.66	.71	.72
- Inspiring people to exceed expectations	.78	.61	.55	.72	.65
Total Reliability for Factor		.75	.76	.69	.76
3. Managing Processes					
- Clarifying policies	.86	.73	.70	.76	.74
- Expecting accurate work	.80	.74	.80	.89	.72
- Controlling projects	.86	.78	.80	.78	.77
Total Reliability for Factor		.84	.86	.85	.833
4. Producing Results					
- Focusing on competition	.81	.71	.71	.76	.68
- Showing a hard work ethic	.81	.63	.69	.66	.55
- Emphasising speed	.69	.64	.69	.72	.49
Total Reliability for Factor		.76	.79	.66	.77

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Table 4: Behavioural complexity across countries

Behavioural Complexity Dimensions	All (n = 286)	SD	Ireland (n = 118)	US (n = 43)	South Africa (n = 125)
1. Relating to people (overall)	**3.86**	.53	**3.81**	**3.68**	**3.96**
a. Encouraging participation	4.08	.58	4.09	4.05	4.09
b. Developing people	3.62	.80	3.55	3.15	3.85
c. Acknowledging personal needs	3.87	.66	3.81	3.83	3.94
2. Leading change (overall)	**3.61**	.47	**3.58**	**3.61**	**3.64**
a.. Anticipating customer needs	3.66	.63	3.57	3.72	3.72
b. Initiating significant change	3.54	.67	3.51	3.57	3.57
c. Inspiring people to exceed expectations	3.60	.74	3.66	3.53	3.57
3. Managing processes (overall)	**3.85**	.54	**3.85**	**3.74**	**3.90**
a. Clarifying policies	3.86	.68	3.85	3.73	3.92
b. Expecting accurate work	4.09	.60	4.03	3.93	4.20
c. Controlling projects	3.60	.72	3.66	3.53	3.57
4. Producing results (overall)	**3.73**	.49	**3.67**	**3.77**	**3.77**
a. Focusing on competition	3.54	.72	3.41	3.68	3.61
b. Showing a hard work ethic	4.03	.63	4.04	3.89	4.07
c. Emphasising speed	3.78	.60	3.69	3.88	3.83

Table 5: Behavioural complexity across countries

	Males				***Females***			
	Ireland	*US*	*South Africa*	***Total***	*Ireland*	*US*	*South Africa*	***Total***
Relating to people	3.89	3.59	3.96	**3.89**	3.77	3.93	3.90	**3.85**
Leading change	3.60	3.51	3.68	**3.63**	3.54	3.80	3.49	**3.57**
Managing processes	3.86	3.56	3.92	**3.86**	3.89	4.08	3.92	**3.93**
Producing results	3.75	3.64	3.85	**3.79**	3.57	3.92	3.57	**3.64**

Table 6: Behavioural Complexity Dimensions: Means (SDs)

Encouraging participation	**Male**	**Female**
Ireland	4.11 (.56)	4.05 (.60)
US	3.95 (.64)	4.25 (.37)
South Africa	4.16 (.50)	3.92 (.72)
Developing people	**Male**	**Female**
Ireland	3.74 (.60)	3.38 (.80)
US	3.04 (.99)	3.47 (.94)
South Africa	3.87 (.69)	3.80 (.79)
Initiating significant change	**Male**	**Female**
Ireland	3.57 (.56)	3.55 (.74)
US	3.43 (.89)	3.71 (.65)
South Africa	3.64 (.62)	3.29 (.90)

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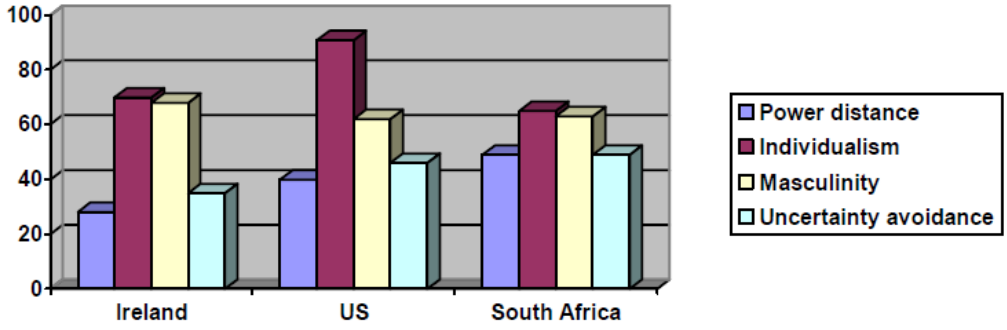
Contact: edel.conway@dcu.ie

Figure 1. Hofstede's [2001] dimensions across Ireland, US and South Africa



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Contact: edel.conway@dcu.ie