



SLEEP THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURE

WHY READ THIS?

We think of sleep as something we do 'on our own' but this is hardly the case if we consider that most people sleep with a partner or share accommodation with family, friends or colleagues, have pets, have neighbours, and most importantly are part of a larger community with whom they share a set of values, beliefs and behaviours.

This shared knowledge is what we know as 'culture' which influences our understanding of sleep, that is, how we sleep, when we sleep, where we sleep, and what meaning and value we attach to sleep.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

According to Hofstede¹, a social psychologist, culture is "the programming of the human mind by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group". Culture is made up of various layers like an onion (Figure 1).

On the outer layer of the onion, we have symbols, such as words, food and logos. The next layer consists of heroes, real or imaginary figures who are role models for behaviour like statesmen and stateswomen, athletes or company founders. On the third layer, we have rituals, which can include national and religious events, such as Independence Day and Ramadan. Behaviours and practices, like sleep or driving are expressions of these cultural layers, which can be observed. In the core, we have values and beliefs or our 'way of thinking' which drives 'the way we do things'. Describing and discussing values is difficult as they cannot be seen.

Essentially, culture is how we make sense of the world around us and this collective understanding is shared by members of a group, e.g. a nation, it can change over time and is passed down from one generation to the next.

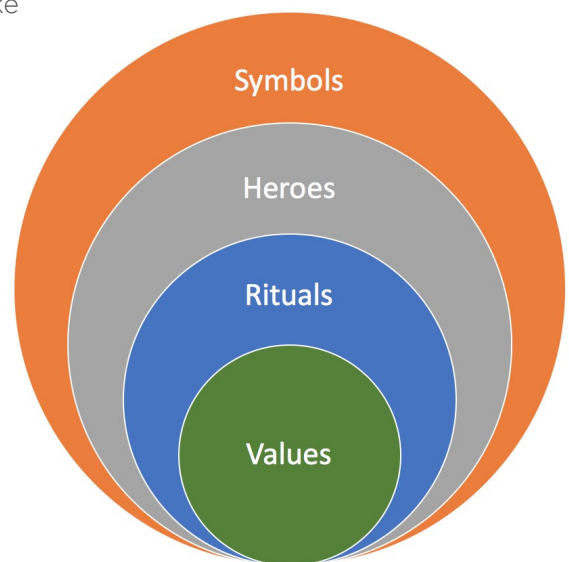


Figure 1. Culture layers.

IS SLEEP A CULTURAL PHENOMENON?

Sleep is a physiological need but because it is also influenced by behaviour, sleep can be thought of as a social and cultural phenomenon too. As such sleep is a practice that is arranged within the family and around work schedules, and these practices are embedded in a broader societal context, e.g. traditions, geography, public policy, economics, education, social class and progress. Therefore, sleep differs across societies.

According to Hofstede the differences between countries lie across 6 dimensions¹:

The extent to which members of a society...

- **Power distance (large vs small)**

...accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place, and which needs no further justification

- **Uncertainty Avoidance**

...feel it should have strict codes of beliefs and behaviours or maintain a more relaxed attitude where practice is more important than principle

- **Individualism vs Collectivism**

...focus on the 'I' or 'We', in other words, feel independent as opposed to being interdependent, as members of a larger community

- **Masculinity vs Femininity**

...prefer achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success as opposed to cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life

- **Long vs Short-term orientation**

...prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion

- **Indulgence vs Restraint**

...think needs, wants and interests should be gratified as opposed to strictly regulated by social norms

‘I’ OR ‘WE’ SLEEP?

Focusing our attention on the individualism-collectivism dimension, Figure 2 shows that compared to non-Western societies, the West is more focused on the ‘I’ than on the ‘We’.

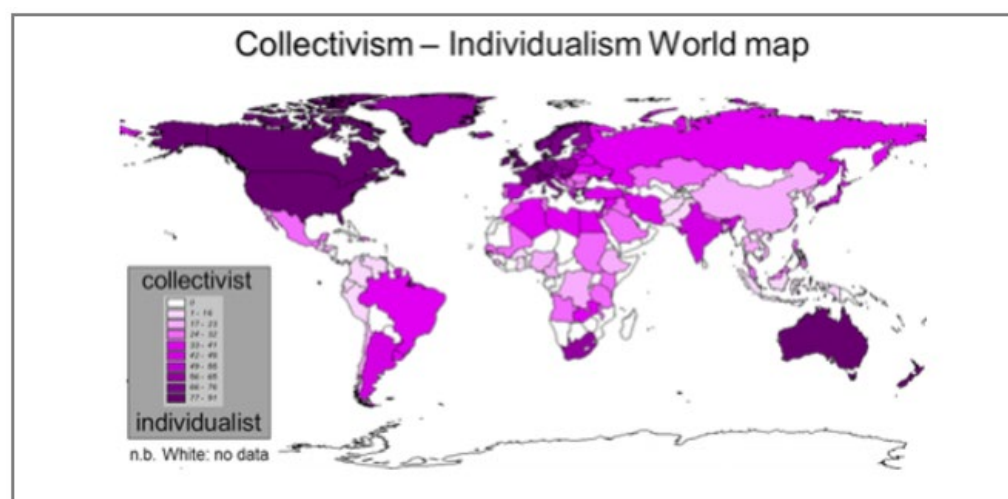


Figure 2. The world distribution of individualism-collectivism¹. Source: www.geerthofstede.com
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This map provides a broad ‘climate map’ of culture for understanding general patterns¹. Of course, there are cultural differences within Western and non-Western countries. That said, looking at sleep globally through the lens of individualism-collectivism can help us understand why in the West sleep tends to be a private matter and why sleep in non-Western societies, is more of a social matter. This difference in the way of thinking affects how/with whom, where and when we sleep².

HOW/WITH WHOM WE SLEEP

In Western countries sleep is mainly done alone or with a partner/spouse but in almost all other cultures co-sleeping, e.g. sharing a bed, is common so adults co-sleep with infants, children with their siblings and in traditional cultures people describe communal sleeping as a form of protection, comfort and security².

Co-sleeping was common in the industrialised countries of the West until the nineteenth century. It is still practised in the West today, but evidence suggests that in Western countries, pre-schoolers are more likely to sleep in their own bed (90.6%) compared to their counterparts in Asian countries (28.1%)³.

In Asia, the likelihood of sharing a room increases if people live in rural compared to urban areas. For example, a study found that in India, the bedroom of rural school children was more crowded than that of urban children (5 vs 3 people)⁴. That said, two thirds of Indian children shared a bed, regardless of where they lived⁴. In non-Western countries, co-sleeping is therefore seen as part of the fabric of family life.

WHERE WE SLEEP

Because sleep tends to be a private matter in the West, the common belief is that sleep is something we are in control of or should take control of, for example, by adopting sleep habits that promote sleep like ensuring the bedroom is cool, dark and quiet.

Instead, research shows that in non-Western societies, sleep settings are social spaces. For example, studies of traditional cultures show the sleep environment is not always dark, e.g. if people sleep by the fire.

Sleep settings can be noisy with people sleeping in the same space or in the same bed which means little can be done to protect sleep from cries, snores and night movement associated with different bedtimes and going to the bathroom⁵.

A cool, dark and quiet space is therefore difficult to achieve at night in crowded and low-income populations. This highlights that socio-economic and geographical factors, e.g. hot climate, combine with cultural views that sleep is a social affair, to shape sleep.

WHEN WE SLEEP

Bedtimes also vary across cultures. For example, sleep taken in one continuous block at night reflects contemporary Western culture. Some researchers think that human sleep does not have to be taken in one sleep bout at night as demonstrated by the siesta habit in Mediterranean and equatorial cultures⁵.

Here a mix of traditions, cultural values and climate conditions have resulted in segmented sleep where napping occurs in the hot summer hours post-lunch followed by night-time sleep.

There is some evidence that sleep was not taken in one block at night in pre-industrial societies. Historical texts refer to 'first' and 'second' sleep of about four hours each bridged by up to one hour or more of wakefulness in the middle of the night when people woke up to pray, read, contemplate, converse, have sex or keep watch against predators in traditional societies^{2,5}. Later sleep times brought about by the industrial age, electric light and temperature control resulted in sleep taken in one solid block at night².

For example, in higher latitudes, e.g. Northern Europe, the use of light has shortened long winter nights and made it possible to take sleep in one block.

In recent years research has shown that light at the wrong time, e.g. at night, can disrupt sleep because it signals to the body it is time to be awake. As a result, people go to bed later and obtain less sleep on school or work nights. Cultural differences can reduce or increase the problem of short sleep on school nights.

For example, in teenagers, the body clock changes to a later time which means that they cannot fall asleep before midnight. This biological change coupled with exposure to light at night, e.g. blue light emitting devices and early school start times can result in significant sleep loss.

A study showed that U.S. teenagers started school an average of 47 minutes earlier than their Australian counterparts⁶. The difference in school start times was associated with 23 minutes less sleep per school night in U.S. children⁶. Therefore, our physiology combines with cultural practices (e.g. when school starts) to influence how much sleep we obtain.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN SLEEP?

AT A PERSONAL LEVEL

At a personal level, it is important to reflect on how culture shapes sleep patterns.

The roles we take in society are often unspoken, but they have the potential to disrupt our sleep or indeed improve it, depending on the situation. For example, if we see sleep as a social matter, then we are more likely to adapt to sharing accommodation. That said, the potential for disrupted sleep increases in such environments so the use of sleep-promoting behaviours, using ear plugs and eye masks, becomes important.

Similarly, sleep-promoting habits can improve sleep in higher latitudes such as Scandinavia. Here, days are extended in summer so in June the sun does not set at all in the most northern regions. A strong light-dark cycle is necessary to keep the sleep-wake cycle in sync with the 24-hour body clock. Therefore, darkness at night can be restored by using window blinds at the appropriate times and keeping a normal routine for bedtime/sleep.

In winter, when nights are extended and it's dark around the clock in January in the most northern regions, one hour of bright light in the morning has been shown to keep the body clock to a regular 24-hour schedule, improving sleep and reducing symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)⁷, a type of depression that peaks in winter when people experience low levels of natural daylight.

AT GROUP LEVEL

It is important for employers, sleep clinicians, researchers and consultants to be mindful of cultural differences in sleep.

The very notion of sleep disorders, for example, is rooted in Western sleep medicine which views sleep as 'good' or 'bad', so sleep becomes a medical issue, something to fix. Instead, we need to understand why cultures adopt different sleep practices and work with groups within these cultures to improve sleep. This means that cultural differences cannot be seen as barriers to sleep health but should be seen as part of the solution to improve sleep. For example, napping serves a purpose in shiftwork populations, particularly in countries where napping has become a habit because of tradition and geographical location, e.g. the need to avoid heat.

However, we must not forget that socio-economic factors influence how long and how well we sleep too.

Figure 3 shows in most wealthy countries, people obtain the healthy range of sleep per day: 7-9 hours⁸. Instead, people in less wealthy economies tend to obtain less than 7 hours of sleep. That said, in some wealthy economies such as Singapore, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Japan, sleep duration is below the healthy sleep range. This indicates that other forces are at play and more needs to be understood about national and organisational culture.



Figure 3. Sleep duration vs GDP per person across different countries. Source: Matt MacLean, Sleep Cycle, IMF, in Tozer, J. (2018). 'Which countries get the most sleep?', The Economist. <https://www.1843magazine.com/data-graphic/what-the-numbers-say/which-countries-get-the-most-sleep>

TO SUMMARISE

Cross-cultural studies highlight that sleep patterns change across cultures and over time and using the individualism-collectivism dimension is one way in which sleep can be compared across cultures. Accordingly, evidence suggests that in non-Western societies sleep is viewed as a social matter and woven into family life so bedtimes are relatively more fluid, napping and co-sleeping are common. To successfully understand and improve sleep, we therefore need to take into account cultural and socio-economic factors and be mindful that habits that may be considered negative in one society, may in fact be positive in another.

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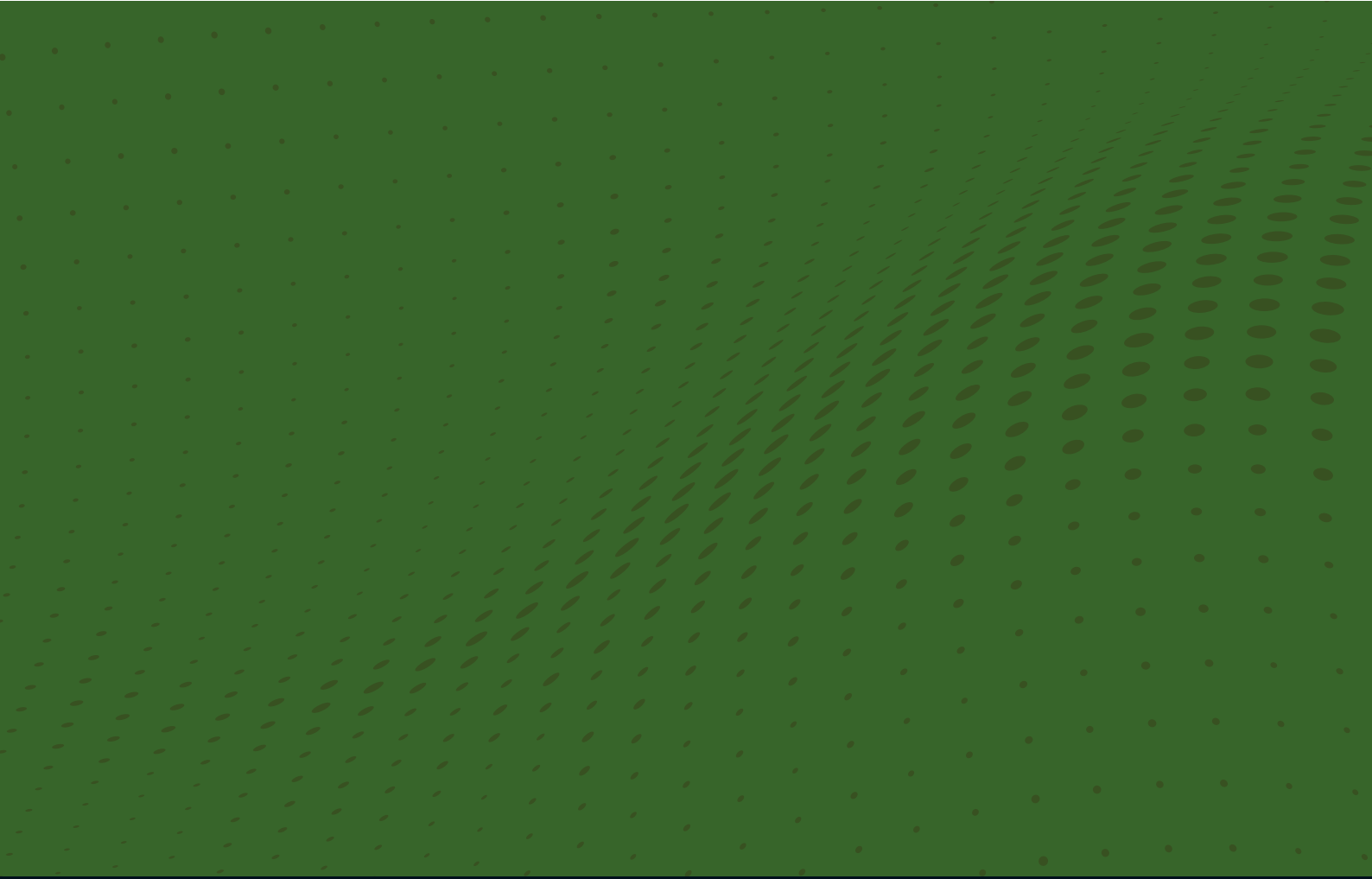
Phone: +44 (0)1276 859 519

Email: hello@bainessimmons.com

Website: www.bainessimmons.com

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Specialists in Fatigue Risk Management

2 City Place, Beehive Ring Road, Gatwick, RH6 0PA

Tel: +44 (0)1276 859 519
www.bainessimmons.com