

## **The case of ascription in a Caribbean culture**

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### **Abstract**

This work examined how the outcome of a meeting was influenced by the culturally assigned traits of the person conducting a meeting and how those assigned cultural traits or ascription reduced the participation of the attendees in contributing to problem-solving. We found that ascription was a deterrent to the participation of the attendees.

### **Introduction**

Culture is difficult to study because it is lived not studied. That postulate has followed us vividly influencing our approach to dealing with other cultures, and how we learn about the diversity of cultural interactions. A broad concept of culture and cultural differences are used in ways that may not be helpful. The danger in frequently using the term “culture” is that it refers to a broad spectrum of values, ideals, concepts and expected behaviors. One specific aspect of culture that help analyze human behavior is the probable outcome of contrasting cultural diversity encounters. (Brislin, 1993, p. 3). One of those cultural aspects that we are exploring is that of “ascription”, its prominence in Caribbean culture, and its effects on the outcomes of business meetings.

## **Ascription**

According to Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1998), all societies give certain members higher status than others, signaling that unusual attention should be focused upon such people and their activities. While some societies accord status to people based on the outcome of their achievement, others ascribe it to them by age, class, gender, education, and so on (p.105). The first kind of status is called achieved status and the second is ascribed status. While achieved status refers to doing, ascribed status refers to being. When we look at a particular person, we're partly influenced by their track record, but we're also influenced by their age, gender, social connections, work position, education level, and profession. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 105). This is the actual case in Latin American countries with Spanish heritage. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), indicate that while there are ascriptions that are not logically connected with business performance (i.e., effectiveness and efficiency), such as gender, skin color of birthplace, there are some ascriptions that do make good sense in predicting business performance: age and experience, educational level and professional qualifications (p.105). For example, in Latin heritage countries, such as Puerto Rico it is not uncommon to observe how traditional professionals are extol to an almost incontestable status by peers and other workers. One situation that comes to our mind is when a pharmacist assistant became upset with a customer who asked for the properties of a medicine before discussing with the physician the specific medicine for the next day's scheduled appointment. The pharmacist assistant told the customer that the physician was not to be questioned based on his professional status, in other words, its ascription was attributed to its medicine doctor title.

A culture may ascribe higher status to its better-educated employees in the belief that scholarly success will lead to corporate success. In Latin America, including Puerto Rico,

although Puerto Rico has been an American territory since 1898<sup>1</sup> has maintained a strong Spanish culture which at moments has very strong contrasting views with the American culture. In the workplace, it can be extremely frustrating for managers to achieve performance cultures when the ascriptive power behind the throne is lurking in the work environment (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, pp. 110-111.).

In Puerto Rico, which is at the core of our paper, we found that titles received from formal education ascribe the recipient with an array of benefits not found in performing countries, even when they recognize professional titles as an important ingredient in the development of human resources. In Latin America and Puerto Rico is common practice to call workers by their professional titles, such as medicine doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. A lawyer and pharmacist are called “licenciado” if male or “licenciada” if female followed by the person's surname. In contrast, in the United States, an attorney is called an attorney or counselor, or Mr. Smith or Mrs. Smith, or just simply Bob or Mary. In Puerto Rico, it is perceived as disrespectful to omit the formal title of any profession, especially by those at the lower echelons of the organization, even if the person has a level of expertise or experience that surpasses those holding the higher position or educational titles.

In ascribing cultures, status is attributed to those who naturally evoke admiration from others, that is, older people, highly qualified persons, and /or individuals skilled in technology or some knowledge deemed to be of the utmost importance. To show respect for status is to assist the person so distinguished to fulfill the expectations society has for him or her. The status is

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<sup>1</sup> After the Spanish American War in 1898 Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines islands passed from centuries as a Spanish Catholic monarchy to an American Anglo-Saxon Protestant democracy. The United States gave Cuba its independence, while Puerto Rico and the Philippines became colonies of the United States. Eventually, the Philippines became sovereign country after the Second World War on July 4, 1946. Puerto Rico is still an American territory with Commonwealth relationship with the USA.

generally independent of the task or specific function. The individual is not easily compared with others. The performance of an ascribed person is partly determined by the loyalty and affection shown by subordinates, which they in turn display. Those ascribed individuals are perceived as the organization in the sense of personifying it and wielding its power, either internally or externally (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 116). The ascribed manager can oversee a group, task, or organization which are not even related to the tasks performed by the organization. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find, for example, lawyers in charge of engineering companies or government agencies. One case comes to mind when the power company in Puerto Rico<sup>2</sup> was at once directed by an accountant. Although he worked for many years for the energy company, he was not an electrical engineer. The situation occurred during the threat of a tropical storm when he ordered to shut of the power grid. He thought that was the best way to avoid damage. It turned out that shutting down the power grid took almost an entire week to get it back to normal. Assuming that a title gave him the general expertise of an engineer made him assert erroneously his decision-making. Even when the engineers objected to such action, the ascription of the director caused an extraordinary situation for the government, industry, and citizens.

Our attention is focused on the adverse influence that ascription could possess in the decision-making or the outcome of a meeting or focused groups or self-directed teams or an ad hoc group; particularly when the groups do not work with the autonomy that they supposedly enjoyed reaching a solution or consensus to whatever they are trying to achieve. We are referring to the effect of ascription caused by management or supervisory personnel during the process of a formal meeting when the directives indiscriminately contradict or impose their point of view.

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<sup>2</sup> Autoridad de Energía Eléctrica de Puerto Rico (The Bureau of Electrical Energy of Puerto Rico).

From previous investigations, we learned that once an employee suspects that his or her performance is observed or measured, they seem to modify their behavior. An example that comes to mind is the experiment conducted at AT&T Western Electric at the Hawthorne plant in Cicero, Illinois from 1924 and 1927. The Hawthorne facility was the equipment supply division of AT&T, and it was used to conduct an experiment using changes in the illumination of the plant to measure the productivity of the workers. According to Wren & Bedeian (2009), the experiment gave some interesting results on employee behavior although criticized as unscientific, there's no doubt that the Hawthorne researchers pioneered a course of investigation that is still being pursued today (p.307). The authors concluded that "It became evident that little was known about the character of informal work groups and their influence on employee performance" (Wren & Bedeian, 2009, p. 306). However, it looks as if employees modified their behavior during the experiments as they saw it convenient to conduct their work. Workers knew they were observed which is one of the main problems of time-and-motion studies, employee behavioral changes due to being watched. (Finkler, Knickman, Hendrickson, Lipkin Jr., & Thompson, 1993, p. 579). From the ascription point of view, employees knew management, and the higher qualities attributed to their higher level of education, their corporate standing, and personal condition, triggered their behavior modification which appears as one of the causes that resulted in the outcome of the well-known Hawthorne Effect or Paradox.

Latin Americans value status within a hierarchy because it signals the social distance between superior and subordinate. Hierarchy in this sense serves as a mechanism of social differentiation and symbols such as job titles and additional benefits contain a high local meaning of distance from power by the social status, they represent (Elvira & Dávila, 2005, pág. 31). The model that best suits this mutual structure is that of a community where mutual aid

prevails intensely; although this is juxtaposed with the authority to give instructions, criticize, or control. It is contradictory for managers to simultaneously strive to get closer to the base and eliminate the distance of power that is so appreciated by supervisors and subordinates using, for example, committees that symbolize a sense of equality between managers and workers. Elvira & Dávila (2005), quoting Phillippe d'Iribarne's work, proposal that the performance of this supervisor role is difficult; the supervisor must assume the role of boss or boss without behaving like boss or boss (Elvira & Dávila, 2005, p. 42). Furthermore, the authors citing Osland et al, argue that personal relationships in the workplace carry a high emotional content so Latin Americans expect and prefer cordial and affective treatment in work relationships. In addition, personal relationships facilitate a functioning structure for organizations. Loyalty, trust, flexibility, and administrative efficiency are based on relationships of personal empathy (Elvira & Dávila, 2005, pág. 32).

Since the Hawthorne experiment, we have found that both in the United States and Latin America, employees value good treatment by management and the opportunity to contribute to the performance of the firm. Nonetheless, we argue that the cultural fabric of Latin Americans permeates a strong or considerable ascription component that affects the interaction between management and workers. Again, achievement-oriented roles are those that stress performance. However, the Latin American culture is wrongly perceived by Americans and Europeans as less inclined to achieve high performance. This is a misconception since, Latin Americans have a strong work ethic, even with the sometimes evident or subtle at other times, influenced by cultural ascription. We don't perceive Latin Americans as lazy or detached from the organization.

Furthermore, in Latin American organizations, structured hierarchically and vertically, information generally flows from the top down. The communication barriers between manager and worker reside in part in senior management who prefer centralization. In addition, the emotional proximity that prevents subordinates from confronting their superiors about their ideas or actions explains why hierarchical communication is perceived as deficient. This can also be the cause of reduced horizontal relationships. Important aspect of modern management practices that require delegating authority to the people involved in the action (Elvira & Dávila, 2005, pág. 40).

Although Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States since 1898 heavily influenced by the American culture, we find a strong Spanish culture by being a former colony of Spain for almost 400 years. Puerto Rico is a smorgasbord of Spanish African-Taino and American cultural elements; that at times can be confusing and distracting to outsiders. Heavily influenced by the Spanish ways Puerto Rico local companies are centralized and controlled in such a way that decision-making is delegated to upper management. For example, most of the local universities are formed in a centralized structure controlled by a manager invested with a pervasive array of power. Case in point, the top three universities have a central office directed by a Board of Trustees, a President, and other top executives directing campuses and their respective Chancellors. In each of the units, Deans are under the direct supervision of a strong Chancellor who directs each of the faculties with the aid of the Deans and Department Directors.<sup>3</sup> We find the same kind of structure and behavior within locally owned enterprises, where the control resides with upper management. Usually, American companies in Puerto Rico

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<sup>3</sup> When we refer to the President, VP's, Deans and Directors can either be males or females. So, males and females project strong directing traits.

do not revolve around a strong central figure, but a more encompassing environment where decision-making is distributed among the managerial clan of the organization.

Despite this, management in both locally and American-owned firms understand the importance of the worker's commitment and participation and just like Elvira and Dávila (2005) argue, the management role is a fine walk between being a boss or behaving like a boss (31). Here resides the essence of the decision-making in a meeting. As we have witnessed on many occasions, when a strong management figure is present in a meeting, subordinates tend to follow the flow of what the manager perceives as correct versus other approaches presented by those attending the meeting, who could present a sounder argument. The main problem for the manager is that the rest of the attendees to the meeting are going first to patronize the manager or simply stop from making any contribution, most prominently if the worker was openly refuted or halted by the manager. This stops the flow of possible ideas where the best solution to the situation discussed could have resided. The focus of our work is to determine if ascription is pervasive in meetings in Puerto Rico and how it influences the decision-making process.

## **Methodology**

During the past 25 years, we have participated both actively and as guests at many meetings in Puerto Rico. After our first encounter with ascription at its core we decided to document the outcome from that moment forward to determine if ascription was the culprit of the outcome. We took note of the worker's reaction to the meeting's results and their perception of management. The findings were tabulated and used to analyze the pervasiveness of ascription in decision-making.



## Collected data

We have limited our observations to meetings where a strong manager is present. We did not include meeting with line supervisors or mid-level managers, since they eventually will face the scrutiny of upper management, and on many occasions, we didn't get to know the outcome with upper management.

The following are the questions that we posed to ourselves and some of the attendees to the meetings, excluding the superior manager in attendance.

1. Did you find the meeting productive?
2. Did you believe the outcomes of the meetings produced a sound decision?
3. Did you feel constricted at any time during the meeting?
4. Did you feel bullied by the manager in attendance?
5. Did you feel your opinions, contributions, or recommendations were sidelined by the manager?
6. If you felt constricted, did you present a counterargument or contrasting opinion?
7. If you were able to present your contrasting point of view, was it accepted or rejected without any reason or explanation?
8. Was the manager cordial?
9. Was the manager rude?
10. In the future are you planning to limit your contributions in a meeting if a manager is in attendance?

We pondered the idea of distributing a questionnaire with the above inquiry, however, we concluded that it was better to make the observations immediately after the meeting concluded and we perceived that those attendees were more comfortable talking than answering a

questionnaire. Also, we could have lost the opportunity to obtain the data because of the lack of response by the attendees. We were also able to get firsthand impressions just after the conclusion of the meeting, rather than a late response and lost memory of the events that transpired during the gathering.

Our data comes from meetings that we attended on a regular weekly basis for 5 years. Although we participated in many more meetings, we limited our data collection to meetings convened to address a particular problem or situation, hoping to produce a possible solution to the problem. Some of the meetings failed to produce a problem definition or identification, and others never produced a plausible course of action to solve the problem. We obtained our data from 35 employees that we interviewed after the meetings concluded. Although we considered expanding our sample to more than one employee per meeting, we restricted ourselves to 1 participant per meeting, since that simplified our data collection, something that permitted a one-on-one interview with a participant who wasn't in a hurry to leave the just-finished meeting.

The interviewing document contained 10 questions, see Table 1, where two answers were possible, a Yes or No followed by a general observation about the received response. After each of the 35 meetings, we approached a participant and asked them to answer the following 10 questions in an anonymous mode, as a means of protecting the participant from possible reprisals which assured the interviewee to speak openly, ensuring an honest answer. Some of the interviewees refused to participate or answer all questions since they were not sure of the anonymity of the participants.

**Table 1**  
**Questions and Tabulated results**

Question	Yes	No	Observations
1. Did you find the meeting productive?	42%	58%	There was a general feeling that the meetings were a waste of time.
2. Did you believe the outcomes of the meetings produced a sound decision?	34%	66%	There was a general feeling that the meetings did not produce an accurate solution.
3. Did you feel constricted at any time during the meeting?	68%	32%	The workers appeared at ease during the meetings but once concluded they expressed among other non-managerial attendants their frustration with the manager and the result.
4. Did you feel excluded by the manager in attendance?	52%	48%	Half of the participants felt excluded subtly.
5. Did you feel your opinions, contributions, or recommendations were sidelined by the manager?	68%	32%	They felt they were there just to listen to the manager's point of view.
6. If you felt constricted, did you present a counterargument or contrasting opinion?	12%	88%	They felt that managers were invested with a power that they could not contradict.
7. If you were able to present your contrasting point of view, was it accepted?	23%	74%	They were not able to present any contrasting points of view.
8. Was the manager cordial?	44%	56%	Half the time
9. Was the manager rude?	58%	42%	Not openly, more subtly, seems the manager didn't like other opinions.
10. In the future are you planning to limit your contributions in a meeting if a manager is in attendance?	73%	27%	They felt it was a total waste of their time.

**Discussion of results**

From the results, we found that approximately 25% of the participants couldn't or refused to answer some of the questions, because they were not sure of the outcome of the specific outcome asked. We first thought that the respondents were afraid to answer the question for whatever reason, but they indicated that wasn't the reason, and they confirmed that it was because they were not sure of what to answer, either with the way the meeting was conducted or

couldn't figure out from the approach, style or terms used by the manager or person in charge, which confused the participant. For example, on various occasions, the manager or facilitator used elaborate words that many of the participants couldn't grasp or distracted themselves from the topic discussed. On other occasions, the participants were not familiar with the procedures explained or just didn't have the expected background to understand the concepts, something that caught our attention. It wasn't that they were obscure terms, it was more forgotten or barely used terms by the participants, therefore, the knowledge was not readily available for them to understand. The manager or person in charge stated at the beginning of one meeting that since everyone should have had a background in statistics, she was going straight forward to discuss the statistical results. To our surprise, most of the participants lacked knowledge since they took stats a long time ago and in their line of work - although the position required a knowledge of math and stats – they repeatedly used primarily the same tools over the years. One case is the use of Control Charts or some forecasting techniques, however, when the manager used analysis of variance, chi-square, or design of experiments or time series we noticed a reduced participation related to the discussion of the findings or questions which pointed out that some participants couldn't understand the discussion of the matter. We thought at first that those participants didn't know, but it was more associated with not remembering the concepts at the time of the meeting. They indicated to us that they had or were planning, after the meeting, to review the forgotten knowledge, more as a precautionary cause in case they found themselves in a similar situation. In another meeting that followed, the manager in charge of the discussion of the same subject, continued using the same dynamics from the previous meeting. About half of the participants who were present in a previous meeting didn't enter the discussion because they were not up to date with the required knowledge. Later after the meeting, they indicated that they had to hit the

books again to be able to take advantage of the discussion. However, about a quarter of the new participants had the same forgotten knowledge problem. This a matter that we plan to address with more details in another paper.

### **Questions analysis**

The first two questions are related since they address the perception of the participants about the general outcome of the meetings. We found that 58% of the participants did not find the meeting, and indicated the meetings were a waste of time while 66% felt the meetings did not produce an adequate or accurate solution or clear course of action or benefit that would have improved their work processes. We wanted to find if the ascription assigned to the manager had any effects on the outcome of the meetings which takes us to the third question, which explored if the participants felt limited or constricted at any time of the meeting. During the meeting the participants appeared at ease, however, once they were out of the meeting they expressed to us their frustration with the authoritative posture of the manager in charge, which is reflected in the 68% that felt excluded at times during the meeting. Only 32% indicated they felt totally at ease during the meeting and the manner the manager conducted the meeting. It didn't surprise us, that 32% were other managers or supervisors in attendance. On the other hand, 52% felt their opinions, contributions, or recommendations were sidelined or excluded by the manager. On one occasion the manager immediately discarded the employee's opinion and recommendation, telling the employee that she had more than 23 years with the company and that, she was the only expert on the process under study at the meeting. To her surprise, the young employee's recommendation was the correct course of action to solve the problem discussed. The manager dared to discard or obviate everything based on the argument that the employee had only completed an associate degree from a Community College. At that moment the rest of the

participants stopped talking or contributing to the discussion. Not as egregious but during other meetings the participants felt constricted to present counterarguments or contrasting points of view, particularly those conducted by highly educated facilitators. We also noticed that about half of the participants were very reluctant to present contrasting points of view to managers or facilitators who were highly educated such as engineers, or those with advanced college degrees such as master's or doctorate. We also found that 68% felt that they were invited to the meeting to serve as an audience for the presenting manager. We also found that 88% of contrasting points of view or recommendations were rejected or discarded without any reason or explanation, a cause of confusion for the participants. Forty-three percent of the participants found the manager less than cordial and they perceived the manager, regardless of their sex or race, as too entitled or arrogant. This is a matter that requires more research since various commented that they felt discriminated against one way or another by the presiding manager, not openly but aversively. While 58% felt the manager was rude or too assertive and aggressive. Those who felt that the manager was less cordial came to this perception based on the manager's manners and, the way they dressed or spoke. While those who felt the manager was rude or too assertive and aggressive, were upset by the way the meetings were conducted or how they discussed the problems to be solved. It is important to stress that the word "discussing" in English has a different connotation to its equivalent in Spanish, "discutir" which has a more negative meaning than in English which has an overtone of elucidating while in Spanish is confrontational.

Finally, a whopping 76% of the participants indicated that they felt the meetings were a total waste of time, and an aversive lack of respect for others in the lower organization's echelon attending the meetings, particularly when presenting contrasting points of view to what the presiding manager presented. They expressed that to avoid future embarrassment or disrespect

from the presiding manager, they will limit their contribution and will participate only when asked by the manager, not from “*motu proprio*” – their own will. Most of the participants indicated that the lack of respect from the presiding manager they perceived wasn’t an open admonition but more of a veiled reprimand encased in an amusing remark or the manager would discard the participant's observations saving the subject matter for a future meeting that they knew was not going to happen.

### **Final thoughts**

As we have presented, ascription could become a strong obstacle to the expected outcome of a meeting. Meetings are interactions where a facilitator and participants work towards a common objective. However, as we have shown, the attributes vested in the facilitator can hinder the participants from contributing to the discussion and solving the problem under consideration by the partakers of the meeting.

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