



A cross-cultural perspective of self-leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – Seeks to understand how differences in national cultures impact on the understanding and meaning of the concept of self-leadership and its application.

Design/methodology/approach – First, research at the intersection of culture and leadership and Hofstede's culture framework are reviewed. Then the main components of self-leadership theory are introduced, and how Hofstede's framework can be used to re-analyze them given differences across cultures is discussed.

Findings – While self-leadership remains, in general, a valid concept, its understanding and application is likely to differ across cultures. Specifically, high power distance raises the importance of the symbolic value of tasks and correspondent covert processes of self-leadership, high uncertainty avoidance makes more explicit the importance of non-rational and intuition-based thought processes, collectivism shows the relevance of social relations, femininity reiterates the importance of social relations and non-rational processes, and long-term orientation introduces the importance of making time an explicit element.

Research limitations/implications – There is a need for further research on self-leadership that investigates the roles of social and cultural relations, communication and language, multilevel interdependencies, and ethics. Empirically there is need for developing a self-leadership instrument that is relevant and applicable across cultures.

Practical implications – This paper should facilitate appreciation of a contingency perspective of self-leadership that requires different modes of application across cultures.

Originality/value – This paper helps fill a gap in the self-leadership literature. In particular, it can facilitate greater understanding of this concept in cultures other than the USA, where it originated.

Keywords Leadership, Cross-cultural studies, National cultures, United States of America

Paper type Conceptual paper



Introduction

The study of culture and leadership has steadily developed as a research stream since the mid-1990s (Dickson *et al.*, 2003). This development includes a wide array of perspectives, such as global leadership (e.g. Adler, 1997), leadership across nations (e.g. House *et al.*, 2004), and leadership within multicultural organizations and environments (e.g. Connerley and Pederson, 2005). Research analyzing the application of leadership theories across cultures suggests that leadership practices are culturally bound. In fact, Adler (1997) states that there are no universal theories of leadership. In this paper we investigate this premise by examining the culturally bounded nature of leadership and exploring the applicability of self-leadership theory across cultures. Specifically, this paper draws on Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions framework to address the question of how self-leadership may be understood and practised in cultures other than its US origin.

Given the current trend of globalization it is increasingly likely that individuals will work within different cultures. In these situations, the question arises as to whether individuals who practise self-leadership within their native culture will be able to continue to do so in other cultural contexts or, alternatively, to what extent their understanding and practice of self-leadership will need to change and adapt. We believe that a cross-cultural consideration of self-leadership is a worthwhile pursuit to explore the ways in which the practice of self-leadership may be shaped by culture-dependent ways of thinking and acting. Thus, our purpose is to understand how differences in national cultures (Hofstede, 1980, 2001) impact on the concept of self-leadership, as we know it today (Neck and Houghton, 2006). To that end, we first provide a brief overview of research in the intersection of culture and leadership. We then introduce the main components of self-leadership theory and review Hofstede's cultural framework. Finally, we discuss how Hofstede's dimensions of national culture can be used to re-analyze the components of self-leadership theory in non-US cultures. Our research contributes to the literature by providing a first step toward increasing the relevance of self-leadership theory to other cultures. As such, it addresses Hofstede's (2001) and Adler's (1997) calls for more local and cultural specific theories of management and organizations.

Culture and leadership

According to Nancy Adler (1997, p. 174), there are numerous definitions of leadership but "there are no global leadership theories". None of the existing theories, she adds, can be considered a universal theory of leadership because they reflect an American perspective and practices that are based on its own cultural values. To illustrate this Adler (1997, pp. 174-5) states that:

For example, based on 221 definitions of leadership from the twentieth century, Rost (1991) concluded that leadership has most frequently been seen as rational, management-oriented, male, technocratic, quantitative, cost-driven, hierarchical, short-term, pragmatic, and materialistic. Not surprisingly, many of these listed descriptors reflect some of the core values of American culture. For example, relative to people from most other cultures, Americans tend to have a more short-term orientation (e.g., they emphasize this quarter's results and daily reported share prices), a more materialistic orientation (e.g., forty percent of American managers still think that "the bottom line" is the criterion for corporate health, whereas in no other nation can find even thirty percent of its managers who take this view;

see Hampden-Turner, 1993), and a more quantitative orientation (e.g., emphasizing measurable contributions and results rather than relying on less easily quantified qualities such as success in relationship-building).

Adler implies that the definition of leadership has been problematic because of having not paid sufficient attention to various research issues, including theoretical viewpoints, methodology, and the people concerned. Likewise, the notion of culture is not without controversies. In reviewing the notion of culture, Hofstede (2001) identified many sources of these controversies. For him culture is such a complex, multi-level, and multi-disciplinary concept that for practical reasons social scientists tend to focus only on some of its aspects, which “has had the unfortunate side effect of overspecialization” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 20). Hofstede observed that to understand this complexity it would be necessary to do an ideal study of culture with a combination of “idiographic and nomothetic, emic and etic, qualitative and quantitative elements” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 26). However, he adds, this may not be possible and, for practical reasons at least, it forces researchers to make choices.

Given the nature of these two concepts – culture and leadership – it is unsurprising that their intersection has given rise to a variety of research questions, controversies, and demands for further studies (Dickson *et al.*, 2001; McCall, 2001). We illustrate this with three examples.

First, looking at culture from a gender perspective, Adler (1997) pointed out that there is a feminization of global leadership, not only due to the increasing number of women in leadership positions but also because of the relevance and wide expansion of certain leadership traits and qualities that have traditionally been connoted as feminine, such as cooperation, participation, and relational styles. In other words, for Adler (1997) global leadership cannot be defined any more in terms of the masculine ideal or the American ethos. This makes us think whether self-leadership needs also to be reconsidered, particularly in light of two dimensions of culture proposed by Hofstede: individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity.

Second, Blunt and Jones (1997) argued that Western models of leadership are not applicable to East Asian and African developing countries, mainly because of differences in viewpoints regarding authority, loyalty and interpersonal relations. Similarly, we are led to consider whether self-leadership maintains the same meaning in other cultures given two other dimensions of culture: power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

Third, drawing on Hofstede’s work, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) program provides a comparison of implicit leadership theories in 62 nations (House *et al.*, 2004). The GLOBE program is a cross-cultural longitudinal research project that develops “an empirically-based theory to describe, understand, and predict the impact of specific cultural variables on leadership and organizational processes and the effectiveness of these processes” (House *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). Given that GLOBE is a longitudinal project, we are also intrigued in whether the last dimension of Hofstede’s work – short- versus long-term orientation – is also relevant to explain self-leadership in other cultures.

We know already that it may not be possible to have an ideal study of culture (Hofstede, 2001), so it is not surprising when scholars point out theoretical and methodological limitations of the GLOBE project while emphasizing the need for further research (Scandura and Dorfman, 2004). It is in this spirit that we also consider

the study of self-leadership in other cultures to be worthy of reflection and discussion. Similar to the GLOBE project and other cross-cultural management studies, we draw on Hofstede's work (1980, 2001) as our main culture framework.

Self-leadership

This section addresses three sets of questions:

- (1) What is the origin of self-leadership, what does it mean, and how different it is from other related concepts?
- (2) How and why is the concept of self-leadership complex?
- (3) How can we develop a cross-cultural analysis of self-leadership?

Origins of self-leadership

The concept of self-leadership emerged out of the notion of self-management and relates to the process of influencing oneself (Manz, 1983, 1986, 1992; Manz and Neck, 1999, 2004; Manz and Sims, 1990, 2001). Neck and Houghton (2006) provide a comprehensive historical overview of the concept and how it is different from related concepts including self-regulation and self-management. According to Neck and Houghton (2006), self-regulation theory is a descriptive framework to explain how people behave, whereas self-management is a prescriptive framework to suggest how people should behave. However, both these theories do not indicate what types of behaviors should be done and why, which is the concern of self-leadership theory.

Generally speaking, self-leadership aims at the enhancement of personal effectiveness through three categories of individual-level strategies:

- (1) behavior-focused strategies;
- (2) natural reward strategies; and
- (3) constructive thought strategies (Houghton and Neck, 2002; Neck and Houghton, 2006).

According to Neck and Houghton (2006), behavioral-focused strategies aim at management of behaviors, and include:

- self-observation, or increase of one's awareness about when and why to act;
- self-goal setting, or the decision about what goals to pursue and how should be pursued;
- self-rewards, or compensations to energize oneself;
- self-punishment, or constructive self-feedback; and
- self-cueing, or external signaling.

The category of natural rewards strategies aim the increase of feelings of competence and self-determination through the enhancement and focus on enjoyable task features. Finally, constructive thought processes aim the creation of positive thinking through the reduction of dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions, the reduction of negative self-talk, and increase of positive self-image.

In our view, the practice of self-leadership requires individuals to use strategies from all three categories above – behavioral, natural rewards, and constructive

thought. Nevertheless, being a practice-oriented theory, we believe that individuals who exercise self-leadership will put more or less effort into certain strategies depending on the contexts and situations where they are involved, and as these situations unfold over time. One could suggest that the self-leadership model functions as an integrated whole but its functioning is like loose coupling systems, the parts of which are joined by “few common or weak common variables” (Weick, 1979, p. 111). Moreover, we think that this holistic perspective of self-leadership is valid in every culture but the selection and use of specific strategies may differ. In other words, the intensity and association between components of the self-leadership model is not fixed.

Complexity of self-leadership

Despite a focus on the individual, we would like to point out that various self-leadership scholars have recognized the importance of multilevel analysis in developing theoretical work (e.g. Bligh *et al.*, 2006) as well as empirical work (e.g. Yun *et al.*, 2006). Given our interest in integrating self-leadership and culture, we discuss the levels of analysis of these concepts and explore ways to integrate them.

Self-leadership is mostly concerned in explaining ways to enhance organizational performance through individual-dependent thinking and acting. Thus self-leadership can be considered as an entry point (at the individual level) for organizational analysis. To illustrate this it is worth to see how scholars have drawn on self-leadership to propose ways to enhance various organizational processes and functions including, for example, empowering leadership in self-managing teams (Manz and Sims, 1987), team-based knowledge work (e.g. Bligh *et al.*, 2006), or organizational innovation and creativity (DiLiello and Houghton, 2006).

However, self-leadership has not been applied to higher organizational levels, in particular national culture. One possible reason for this is the inexistence of a universal measurement scale. In this regard, Neubert and Wu (2006) have made a first step to develop a self-leadership scale for the Chinese context.

At first glance, one might think that self-leadership and national culture operate at different levels of analysis – the individual and the nation, respectively. However, as we have discussed above, both concepts draw on theoretical frameworks that cross multiple levels. Our view here is that, traditionally, each concept has preferred a certain level as a starting point of organization analysis: individual level for self-leadership and nation level for national culture. Yet both concepts have drawn on theories and borrowed ideas situated at other levels. Self-leadership draws on self-management and self-regulation theories, more focused at the group and organizational levels respectively. National culture accepts that individuals and societies may influence national culture, respectively personal and societal levels.

Developing a cross-cultural analysis of self-leadership

We think that a cross-cultural perspective of self-leadership is necessarily a multi-level analysis with entry points at micro and/or macro levels. To illustrate this we explore the theoretical relationship between self-leadership and culture by considering two supporting theories of self-leadership:

- (1) intrinsic motivation theory; and
- (2) social cognitive theory.

First, according to Remedios and Boreham (2004) individuals are said to be intrinsically motivated, as opposed to externally motivated, when they feel that they:

- have an effect on the environment (White, 1959);
- are authors of their own actions (deCharms, 1968); or
- have autonomy (Deci, 1975).

In sum, intrinsic motivation is based on one's opportunity to act with purpose. The implied notion of purpose suggests that people assign values to thinking, feeling, and acting, which as we mentioned before is seen by Hofstede as the foundation of culture, a "collective mental programming".

Second, social cognitive theory explains human behavior as a system of interrelationships among internal influences, external influences, and behavior that alternates the production with reduction of dysfunctions, and *vice versa*, tending towards equilibrium (Bandura, 1986). As such it accounts for the interrelation among cognitive, social, and behavioral dimensions of self-leadership. Since a "collective mental program" is a system of values that results from the interrelation between thinking, feeling, and acting, we could infer that culture refers also to an interaction between social, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. Note also that the definition of culture as a "collective programming of the mind" implies all three dimensions:

- (1) *collective* captures the social dimension;
- (2) *programming* is representative of the behavioral dimension; and
- (3) the *mind* alludes to the cognitive dimension.

The overlap of these theories indicates a strong link between self-leadership theory and national culture.

To conclude, in our view it is not only possible but also desirable that a cross-cultural analysis of self-leadership is developed, since there are significant links between both theoretical streams. We next analyze the ways in which self-leadership is likely to be understood, and in particular, how it may be applied differently across cultures. This analysis will utilize Hofstede's five cultural dimensions:

- (1) power distance;
- (2) uncertainty avoidance;
- (3) individual (collective);
- (4) masculine (feminine); and
- (5) future orientation.

Hofstede's approach to culture

According to Dickson *et al.* (2003) the most recognized (and criticized) culture dimensions in leadership research are those proposed by Hofstede (1980, 2001). Other dimensions have also been used to study culture, namely by Schwartz (1999), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), and those in the GLOBE program (House *et al.*, 2004). Yet in this paper we focus on Hofstede's framework, both because of its conceptual clarity and its broad visibility in the literature. In this section we firstly present Hofstede's definition of culture and then

discuss some of its premises that in our view are relevant for a cross cultural analysis of self-leadership.

According to Hofstede culture is a “collective mental programming: it is that part of our conditioning that we share with other members of our nation, region or group but not with members of other nations, regions or groups” (1983, p. 76). This definition reveals Hofstede’s humanistic view, which is supported by his critique of rational organization theories that fail to account for non-controllable political dimensions. Such viewpoint had been exposed in a prior article when he stated that “[i]n political situations, there is no consensus about goals, and replacing the organizational reality by a model which treats people as means is no longer allowed.” (Hofstede, 1978, p. 460). Hofstede’s definition of culture is based on various assumptions, three of which we consider relevant to our study because of their implications to theory, research, and practice of self-leadership in other cultures. These assumptions are:

- (1) human behavior is predictable;
- (2) culture is a multilevel phenomenon; and
- (3) managerial practices are influenced by communication and cooperation.

First, Hofstede considers that culture, mind, values, and behavior predictability are all interrelated. Human behavior is to some extent predictable because it is based in culture, a “mental programming” that is extremely stable over time in the absence of radical social events such as trade, technological breakthroughs, and economic or political dominance (Hofstede, 2001). The mind is a major concept in Hofstede’s concept of culture: “the mind stands for the head, heart, and hands – that is thinking, feeling, and acting, with consequences for beliefs, attitudes, and skills”. In turn this implies that “systems of values are a core element of culture” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 10) where value is “a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 5). Though values are invisible, Hofstede considers that culture as systems of values is manifested in symbols, heroes, rituals, and practices, and as such they can be observed, compared, and somehow predicted. Such predictability can be explored through cultural comparisons based on fundamental human problems common to most societies (nations).

However, the identification of cultural differences does not mean that one can fully describe a culture since “there is no commonly accepted language to describe such a complex thing as ‘culture’” (Hofstede, 1983, p. 77). Furthermore, culture does not correspond to the sum or combination of the five cultural dimensions. Instead these dimensions merely constitute a tool to grasp the values that define the collective programming of the mind (Hofstede, 2001). To emphasize predictability of culture, though in imperfect ways, Hofstede suggests that the collective programming of the mind resembles Bourdieu’s concept of “*habitus*”:

Certain conditions of existence produce a *habitus*, a system of permanent and transferable tendencies. A *habitus* ... functions as the basis for practices and images ... which can be collectively orchestrated without an actual conductor (Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 88-9, cited in Hofstede, 2001, p. 4).

Self-leadership scholars should not neglect this idea, for it suggests that self-leadership may be different across cultures and amenable to be predicted.

Second, though Hofstede defined culture as a group-level phenomenon, he is aware that it interacts with individual and societal level constructs. As a group-level phenomenon he stated that “culture determines the uniqueness of a human group in the same way personality determines the uniqueness of an individual” (2001, p. 10). Furthermore, “culture as [collective] mental programming is also a crystallization of history in the minds, hearts, and hands of the present generation” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 12). Yet he recognizes that culture can be shaped by constructs operating at lower level (individual) and upper level (societal) constructs, since for him culture and people are mutually shaped over time, and just as people can move to new cultural spaces (social groups) they can also modify through practice (namely structure and functioning of institutions) their notion of culture. Regarding this mutual influence between people and culture, Hofstede mentioned that the institutions-versus-culture debate often seen among sociologists versus anthropologists/psychologists is a non-issue since in his view “institutions reflect minds and vice versa” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 20). This idea of levels of analysis is important for self-leadership to the extent that it gives us a way to link micro- to macro-level constructs.

This brings us to the third premise about managerial practice. Hofstede (1998) was also interested in explaining the kind of managerial practices that may affect employees’ attitudes and organizational culture. From his studies he concluded that there is no relationship between managerial practices and employee attitudes or organizational culture, except for practices in the area of communication and cooperation. This means that language (verbal or non-verbal) and social interaction are two important factors in changing employees’ attitudes. This finding may have important implications for both the theory and practice of self-leadership. For self-leadership theory one cannot neglect the particularities of language and social relations, since people from different cultures may elicit distinct patterns between what they do, think, or say (thinking, feeling, and acting). For practice we may be able to understand better how to be a more effective self-leader depending on the levels of importance of language and social relations in different cultures. Having discussed Hofstede’s definition of culture, we need to know what exactly makes cultures different.

In our view, the first assumption about the predictability of human behavior supports a major premise of our study that self-leadership in other cultures may still abide by certain behavioral and cognitive patterns, which though unknown today, may be understood in the future. The second assumption regarding the multilevel of the phenomena suggests a way to further investigation of self-leadership across cultures. Last, the premise about communication and cooperation indicates the research focus for cross-cultural analyses of self-leadership and suggests two areas for developing practical applications of self-leadership in other cultures.

Five dimensions of national culture

Departing from philosophical debates about the dualities of general/specific and different/similar, Hofstede proposes five independent dimensions of national culture that represent “fundamental problems of society” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 1). These dimensions are:

- (1) power distance;
- (2) uncertainty avoidance;

- (3) individualism (collectivism);
- (4) masculinity (femininity); and
- (5) future orientation (long-term versus short-term).

In this section we describe each of these and raise questions regarding their relevance to a cross-cultural analysis of self-leadership, which we develop in the following section.

Power distance refers to the “different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). According to Hofstede (1980), inequality is generally related to the weights and status that societies put in matters such as prestige, wealth and power. In terms of organizations, adds Hofstede, inequality in power is inevitable and functional and is usually manifested in hierarchical (subordinate-superior) relations. Specifically, power distance can be observed in three aspects of decision making:

- (1) styles of decision making;
- (2) types of decision making; and
- (3) fear to disagree with superiors.

In other words, power distance is concerned with who decides what in organizations and how that decision process is made. Self-leadership assumes that individuals have some autonomy and decision-making capacity to set and perform towards their own goals. However, this cultural dimension raises concerns about the extent that is really possible, namely in countries with power distance higher than the USA.

Uncertainty avoidance is related to the “level of stress in a society in face of unknown future” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). Everyone perceives uncertainty but the ways people use to cope with it are different. These are based on mechanisms and institutions such as technology, law, and religion. In organizations, uncertainty is often related to the environment (not controlled by the organization) and common coping mechanisms include technology, rules, and rituals (Hofstede, 1980). Another characteristic of uncertainty that we also consider relevant for self-leadership is about how we measure it. Hofstede suggests that we look at three indicators:

- (1) rule orientation;
- (2) stress; and
- (3) employment stability.

Regarding this last indicator, Hofstede observed that individuals rely on both rational (logical and normative) and non-rational (sense-making and descriptive) mechanisms. Since self-leadership today consists essentially of rational strategies (behavioral and cognitive), we wonder whether we should also consider non-rational, intuition-based strategies in cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance than that of the USA.

Individualism versus collectivism is about the “integration of individuals into primary groups” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). It is manifested in the ways people from different societies live together, for example nuclear families, extended families, or tribes. Moreover, it reflects people’s expectations to take care of themselves or receive care from their peers (Hofstede, 1980). These societal values are transferred to organizations in different ways. In individualist societies, employees and managers are

expected to work and decide for themselves and they are rewarded on an individual basis. In collective societies, workers tend to cooperate more, make more collective decisions, and perform better in groups. Thus the individualism/collectivism dimension is based on the degree of reliance on social relationships to perform organizational work. Considering that self-leadership assumes individuals to have degrees of autonomy in setting their own goals, this cultural dimension questions the extent that self-leadership is likely to happen in cultures that are more collectivistic than the USA.

Masculinity versus femininity refers to the “division of emotional roles between men and women” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). Masculinity and femininity result from socialization processes and should be viewed as poles of a continuum. Masculinity refers to societies that value assertiveness, toughness, material and economic aspects of life. Femininity represents cultures that emphasize nurturing, care for others, social relationships, and quality of life. In other words, masculinity emphasizes tasks whereas femininity focuses on relations. In masculine cultures, men and women tend to have distinct roles; men are expected to focus on performance while women are expected to focus on relationships. Hofstede (1980) mentions that in masculine societies business organizations tend to have masculine goals and promote men, whereas hospitals tend to have feminine goals and promote more women to nurturing-type positions. In feminine societies men and women are expected to have similar roles, promotion is merit-based, quality of life and people are important, and both men and women are expected to care about job performance and relationships. Furthermore, in feminine cultures, women have less resistance in accessing jobs, getting promotions, and balancing career and family life (Hofstede, 2001). As a concept developed in the USA, a masculine society, it is not surprising that self-leadership emphasizes the enhancement of personal effectiveness that is mostly based on tasks. However, this cultural dimension raises the question of whether self-leadership in more feminine cultures should consider personal effectiveness also based on relationships. The relevance for self-leadership of the tasks versus relationships duality will be discussed later.

As regards long-term versus short-term orientation, future orientation is related to “the choice of focus for people’s efforts: the future or the present” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). This dimension was found from a Chinese Values Survey that included items about personal stability and respect for tradition, values that are common in Asian cultures and Confucianism. It refers to whether people’s time focus is long-term or short-term oriented. Hofstede (2001) suggests that people working in settings with long-term orientation emphasize the development of social relationships and market positions, link up business and family issues, and draw high levels of satisfaction from daily human relations. In contrast, employees in organizations with a short-term orientation draw less satisfaction from daily human relations, tend to separate family and business issues, and usually focus on short-term results. Self-leadership studies have already considered time as a control factor, namely in studies about self-leadership development (e.g. Neck *et al.*, 1997). However, because self-leadership is originated in a short-term, masculine culture it may not fully represent values that are based on social relationships. Thus we are led to think whether self-leadership research should consider time as a specific variable of interest for cultures with longer-term orientation than the USA.

Following Hofstede's (2001) observation that to avoid ethnocentrism researchers should not to use their discretion to reduce theoretical frameworks, we decided in our study to include all five dimensions of culture. We think that a cross-cultural analysis of self-leadership with fewer dimensions of culture demands a prior empirical demonstration. To do otherwise might result in overlooking parts of self-leadership in non-US cultures that we are unaware of. Before doing a cross-cultural analysis of self-leadership, we need to know more about this concept, its theoretical foundations and components.

Cross-cultural view of self-leadership

In developing cross-cultural perspectives of management and organization theories one has to consider two related issues. On the one hand we have to minimize our cultural biases (ethnocentrism), and on the other hand we have to think whether theories can be applied to other contexts, and if so how. To avoid ethnocentrism at the empirical level researchers can draw on multiple local theories, methods, and research. At the theoretical level, this may be even more difficult because researchers have necessarily to make choices in function of their knowledge and resources available (Hofstede, 2001). This paper addresses the first issue by involving a team of researchers with different cultural backgrounds. Considering self-leadership as a self-influencing process and a set of strategies aiming at the enhancement of one's performance, we have to believe that this theory may be applied to most societies. The contrary would be to assume the stagnation of human kind. This does not mean that we see the extension of self-leadership to other cultures as unproblematic. Indeed, we think that some notions, such as self-influence and individual performance, will need to be discussed by non-Western scholars, but the essence of self-leadership remains: individuals can positively shape their own practices.

We mentioned above that self-leadership model functions as a loose coupling system, with few common variables or weak common variables, depending on the context and situation. Thus, in looking at the components of self-leadership from a cross-cultural perspective our interest was to know what variables would be strengthened or weakened when the model is dislocated to non-US cultures. It is important to stress that self-leadership is a US-originated model and thus it is grounded in the US cultural values that have been defined by Hofstede. At this stage our analytical question is the following: what are the conceptual effects of changing each of the cultural dimensions of the current self-leadership model?

Our analysis (Table I) was done in two steps. We first review the consequences of each cultural dimension for leadership, management, and organizations. Then, taking US culture as a reference, we discuss the effect of each cultural dimension on the components of self-leadership.

Our interest is not to discuss the meaning of self-leadership in the cultures studied by Hofstede, since this would require an exhaustive discussion of self-leadership for every possible combination of cultural dimensions. Moreover, our interest is not to make an analysis of self-leadership by geographical regions since, as Hofstede found, neighboring countries may have similarities regarding two or three dimensions but never for all dimensions. This happens because national cultures have unique historical roots (Hofstede, 2001). Instead, our interest is to explore how the variation in each cultural dimension, using US culture as reference, may impact on the current

Cultural dimensions	PDI Human inequality	UAI Unknown future	IDV Integration in groups	MAS Emotional roles	LTO Time focus
Self-leadership	US: low-moderate (40)	US: low (46)	US: high (91)	US: moderate/high (62)	US: low (29)
Behavioral	The Philippines: high (94)	Greece: high (112)	Hong Kong: low (25)	Sweden: low (5)	China: high (118)
focused strategies	How will self-leadership change in non-US cultures?				
Self-observation					
Self-goal setting					
Self-rewards					
Self-punishment					
Self-cueing					
Natural rewards					
strategies					
Enhancement of enjoyable tasks	High power distance raises the importance of the symbolic value of tasks and correspondent covert processes	High uncertainty avoidance makes explicit non-rational, intuition-based thought processes	Collectivism shows the relevance of social relations rather than only tasks	Femininity reiterates the importance of social relations and non-rational, intuition processes	Long-term orientation makes time an explicit and major factor
Focus on enjoyable tasks					
Constructive thought processes					
Reduction of dysfunctional beliefs					
Reduction of negative self-talk					
Increase of positive self-image					

Notes: PDI, power distance index; UAI, uncertainty avoidance index; IDV, individualism index; MAS, masculinity index; LTO, long-term orientation index

Table I.
Cultural analysis of
self-leadership
components

notion of self-leadership. For example, the US culture has the highest individualism score, so our interest is to understand what effects a collectivist culture may have on self-leadership components. We will repeat this procedure for each cultural dimension and based on our discussion we will make some propositions.

Power distance

Hofstede (2001, p. 82) observed that “the popular management literature on leadership often forgets that leadership can exist only as a compliment to ‘subordinateship’”. This implies that power distance is an essential aspect of leadership and it is manifested in leader-follower relationships. Some could argue that self-leadership does not apply to cultures with high power distance because it does not allow significant room for individuals’ autonomy. We think that this is a false problem because what may be different in these cultures is the nature of social relations and how they occur in practice.

For Hofstede high power distance is found in organizations characterized by centralized decision structures, control structures, career dissatisfaction, and vertical leadership styles. In contrast, low power distance is found in organizations with flat structures, openness, career satisfaction, and consultative, horizontal leadership styles.

After reviewing several leadership studies that draw on Hofstede’s work, Dickson *et al.* (2003) observed that in hierarchical societies subordinates are more reluctant to challenge their superiors and leaders are expected to elicit patterns of authoritative behavior. For example, added Dickson *et al.* (2003), in cultures with high power distance, transformational leadership tends to be directive in nature, whereas in cultures with low power distance it tends to be more participative. The suggestion that transformational leadership may be applied with different styles, more directive or participative, suggests to us this may also apply to other types of leadership, particularly to self-leadership. And that such variation in leadership styles may be explained by the influence of culture.

As we saw before, power distance in organizations can be observed in decision-making: styles of decision-making, types of decision making, and fear to disagree with superiors. The US culture has low power distance and individuals have large latitude to practise self-leadership. In other words, they have considerable flexibility, autonomy, and decision-making capacity to set and perform towards their own goals. High power distance may challenge these practices by accentuating more vertical leadership styles, reducing the scope of decision making, and increasing workers’ fear of repercussions. For the sake of precision and clarity let’s think about The Philippines, one of the countries with the highest power distance (Hofstede, 1980). We do not negate that workers and managers in The Philippines have less power than in countries with low power distance; however, we think that this reduction is not as large as expected. In our view, what changes is the nature of the relationships and how it impacts on organizational practices. Specifically, it is known that in low power distance cultures (many Asian and South-American countries) people tend to rely considerably in informal channels to meet people, get information, gain legitimacy, and exercise influence. Moreover, in these cultures action tends to be more covert and symbolic. In other words, in high power distance countries the material and explicit aspects of decision making are reduced, whereas its symbolic and implicit ones increase. In these low power distance cultures, in comparison to low power distance

ones, there is a shift from overt to covert environments and from formal to informal styles. This suggests that the symbolic and subjective components of self-leadership will be emphasized (namely self-observation, self-cueing, and constructive thought processes) while the material and objective aspects (self-goal setting, self-rewards, natural rewards) will be minimized.

In sum, we propose that the practice of self-leadership in cultures with high power distance is likely to be more shaped by social hierarchical forces than in cultures with low power distance. High power distance is likely to contribute to a more restricted and contingent form of self-leadership where the extent of self-influence practised that is independent of cultural expectations and norms is more limited. Thus self-leadership will rely more on symbolic rather than material aspects. Cultures where power distance is low will have a more individually unique and autonomous form of self-leadership. This implies that although the concept of self-leadership remains valid, its application to cultures with high power distance will be more contingent to local norms and cultural expectations.

P1a. Individuals in cultures with higher power distance are more likely to practise restricted/contingent self-leadership.

P1b. Individuals in cultures with lower power distance are more likely to practise autonomous self-leadership.

Uncertainty avoidance

To Hofstede (1980) organizations with high uncertainty avoidance tend to have vertical leadership styles characterized by control practices, rationality, and a lack of confidence and belief in employee's leadership abilities. In contrast, organizations with low uncertainty avoidance tend to adopt more collective leadership styles that are distinguished by factors such as the transformational role of the leader, employees' participation in decision making, and optimism about employees' abilities to lead.

Empirical research suggests that societies with high uncertainty avoidance tend to be more controlling, less delegating and less approachable than those with low uncertainty avoidance (Dickson *et al.*, 2003). High uncertainty avoidance societies value leadership styles that promote planning, career stability, formal rules, and the development of expertise. In contrast, low uncertainty avoidance cultures value more flexibility, innovation, job mobility, and general rather than specialized skills (Dickson *et al.*, 2003). This means that leaders in high uncertainty avoidance environments may emphasize characteristics such as planning and formal rules (emphasis on rules and norms), while in low uncertainty avoidance societies they may prefer innovation and flexibility (entrepreneurial spirit).

In organizations, environmental uncertainty is the most prevalent type of uncertainty and it is minimized through technology, rules, and rituals. Our concern is about how this uncertainty reflects at the individual level and how people handle it. We saw that uncertainty can be assessed through employees' rule orientation, employment stability, and work-related stress. Moreover, we also learned that individuals rely on both rational (logical and normative) and non-rational (intuition, sense-making, and descriptive) processes. The non-rational aspects may be important in our analysis because self-leadership consists essentially of rational strategies (behavioral and cognitive).

In Hofstede's study, the USA appears as having low uncertainty avoidance, which means high willingness to take risks. In contrast, countries like Greece, Japan, or Argentina have high uncertainty avoidance. (Note that uncertainty avoidance may not be directly correlated with economic development, since we may have countries as different as Japan and Greece both with high uncertainty avoidance.) Hofstede suggests that there is no single explanation for differences in uncertainty avoidance, but rather a combination of factors unique to each country. Nevertheless, Hofstede (1980, p. 171) found that the countries showing both low uncertainty avoidance and high masculinity are primarily the Anglo countries. Moreover, he suggests that willingness to take risks may be related to motivation, although he could not find systematic evidence for this. Thus, we suggest that leaders in low uncertainty avoidance settings will have higher levels of intrinsic motivation. In contrast, high uncertainty avoidance contexts place more restrictions on individuals and cause limitations that are self-imposed cognitively.

Given the complexity surrounding uncertainty avoidance we think that it is better to discuss self-leadership on a country-by-country basis. Let's consider the case of Greece, which according to Hofstede (1980, 2001) is one of the countries with highest uncertainty avoidance. Greece organized the Olympic Games of 2004, an event that boosted the country's image, pride, and economy. Yet the investments made to build the necessary infrastructures were of such dimensions that some people say they will be difficult to recover. This example shows high willingness to take risks, as well as the combination of rational and non-rational processes. According to Hofstede this may be considered one of those unique events, on a par with war and technology, which are capable of changing culture. In this case, the Games may have lowered the uncertainty avoidance of Greece's culture.

Thus we conclude that low uncertainty avoidance may be more related with non-rational processes than rational processes. Cultures that tend to rely greatly on rationality may be more reluctant to take risks. This is somehow a new contribution to self-leadership, because until now it has focused mostly on rational processes. We believe that the consideration of self-leadership in cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance in comparison to the US will tend to focus even more on rational aspects of the model, while de-emphasizing non-rational processes such as self-cueing (intuition) and self-image (identity-based). If this is true then self-leadership should also include non-rational, intuition-based strategies. In fact, the introduction of non-rational processes in self-leadership may help explaining why countries such as the USA have simultaneously low uncertainty avoidance and high innovation and creativity rates.

P2a. Individuals in cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance are more likely to practice normative self-leadership.

P2b. Individuals in cultures with lower uncertainty avoidance are more likely to practice entrepreneurial self-leadership.

Individualism (collectivism)

Empirical studies suggest that preferences for leaders with individual or collective characteristics vary according to cultures (Dickson *et al.*, 2003). In collective cultures people tend to identify themselves with leaders' goals and purposes, share the vision of the organization, and show higher levels of loyalty. In individualist cultures, people are

expected to be self-motivated and satisfy their own interests; moreover, they are short-term, and goals- and rewards-oriented. Jung and Avolio (1999) compared the levels of idea generation in terms of culture and leadership styles. They concluded that in individualist cultures people who work with transactional leaders generate more ideas than those who work with transformational leaders, but in collectivist cultures transformational leaders perform better. This finding suggests that relationships rather than transactions play an important role in collective cultures.

In organizations, this cultural dimension reflects the extent that people rely on social relationships to work, take decisions, perform, and be rewarded. As a US-based theory, it is not surprising that self-leadership considers flexibility and autonomy as its cornerstones. However, as Neubert and Wu (2006) have shown, it is also possible to find self-leadership in collectivistic cultures, particularly in China, though some of its components become less relevant (self-observation, self-cueing, natural rewards, and reduction of dysfunctional beliefs). So the question of interest here is not whether self-leadership remains valid in collectivist cultures, but rather what components will change or whether new ones need to be created.

In our view, self-leadership in collectivist cultures will have to address not only task-based performance but also relations-based performance. Note, however, that social relations in collectivistic cultures, in contrast to individualist cultures, have to be understood differently, particularly in terms of “extended” relations. “Extended” relations refer not to the number but to the nature of those relations, more specifically to an expectation to give or receive support from another person. The level of expectations is determined by social rules, norms, or traditions. For example, in China these social rules are based on various types of hierarchical relations, namely father/son, teacher/student, older/younger sibling, and manager/worker. People on both sides of these relationships are expected to play their roles in giving or receiving support.

This does not mean that self-leadership is not valid in collectivistic cultures. On contrary, people in those cultures set and attain their goals having into account the existing social rules, so they still exercise self-leadership but they place more emphasis on relations rather than tasks or transactions. In a different way, we could say that the meaning of “self” differs in individualist and collectivist cultures. In individualist cultures, “self” is considered to be “the totality of all characteristic attributes, conscious and unconscious, mental and physical, of a person” (Corsini, 1999, p. 875). In collectivistic cultures, “self” includes not only personal attributes but also rights and duties associated with social positions of the person.

According to Neubert and Wu (2006), the components of self-leadership prevalent in a collectivist society are self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, self-talk, and self-image. The fact that natural rewards were not found as significant in Neubert and Wu’s research may indicate that in collectivistic cultures the Revised Self Leadership Questionnaire should include items about natural rewards that reflect a collectivist notion of “self” that is based on relations rather than tasks.

In sum, we propose that self-leadership in collectivist cultures is grounded in social rules, norms, and traditions, while in individualist cultures it is shaped more by personal interests and material rewards. Theoretically it can be said that in collectivist environments an individual’s cognitive processes are very much shaped by group relationships, whereas in individualistic settings cognitive processes are mostly self

imposed. In other words, self-leadership in collectivist cultures may be understood and applied on the basis of social relations, while in individualistic cultures it is essentially centered on the person.

Before concluding this section, it is important that we clarify the distinction between self-leadership in collectivist societies and shared leadership. Shared leadership theory explains the performance of groups with high levels of interpersonal influence and suggests that various members of the group will assume the role of leader depending on the situation (Bligh *et al.*, 2006). In contrast, self-leadership in collectivist societies is concerned with performance of individuals, whose actions and thinking are guided not by other individuals (low interpersonal influence) but by culture-dependent expectations associated with different types of relationships. In other words, shared leadership focuses on group performance and is based on tasks and transactions, whereas self-leadership in collectivist societies emphasizes individual performance and is based on relational values. Adding to this, we would say that self-leadership in individualistic societies accentuates more task- and transactional-based values, including legal, economic, and technological.

P3a. Individuals in individualistic cultures are more likely to practise personal-centered self-leadership.

P3b. Individuals in collectivist cultures are more likely to practise relations-centered self-leadership.

Masculinity (femininity)

The gendering of work practices is, according to Hofstede, a result of cultural conventions. For him, “management is an Anglo-Saxon concept developed in the masculine British and American cultures” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 313), which implies that management in other cultures may not necessarily be masculine. Regarding leadership, Hofstede (2001) also points out that feminist cultures will have “feminist heroes” and masculine cultures will have “masculine heroes”. In particular, in feminine cultures the ideal leader (or “manager hero”) is intuitive and seeks consensus and cooperation; in masculine cultures, the manager hero is supposed to be assertive, decisive, and aggressive (Hofstede, 2001).

Traditionally, masculine emotions reflect assertiveness, toughness, material and economic aspects of life, while feminine emotions reflect nurturing, social relations, and quality of life. In terms of organizations, masculinity refers to organizational practices that differentiate between men’s and women’s emotional roles, whereas femininity refers to organizational practices that promote similar emotional roles for men and women.

As a concept that originated in the USA, self-leadership reflects a degree of masculinity, which is particularly evident in the natural rewards component for its emphasis on tasks rather than relationships. The behavioral-focused and constructive thought strategies do not reveal a clear inclination for masculinity or femininity. Thus, when applying self-leadership to a feminine culture, for example Sweden, one might want to consider natural rewards that are based on both tasks and relations. Moreover, we hypothesize that people in feminine cultures will develop an array of behavioral and cognitive strategies that is distinct from masculine cultures. We believe that people in feminine cultures are as interested in improving their own performance as are people in

masculine cultures. However, the way they think and act puts more weight on subjective, intuition-oriented conditions such as care, nurturing and relationships.

- P4a.* Individuals in masculine cultures are more likely to practise material-based self-leadership.
- P4b.* Individuals in feminine cultures are more likely to practise relational-based self-leadership.

Future orientation

Cultures with long-term orientation value the development of social positions, the mix of business and family issues, and most things emerging from long-term relationships. In contrast, cultures with short-term orientation create clearer boundaries between family and business matters and are more concerned with immediate results. As such we are not surprised that self-leadership studies, mostly developed in the USA (short-term orientation culture), have not recognized time as having more conceptual importance.

However, in our view, self-leadership in long-term oriented cultures (e.g. China) necessarily has to include time in all its components. For example, self-observation is a behavioral strategy that aims the increase of awareness regarding when to act and why. Researchers should bear in mind that long-term oriented people may “give time” for “things to happen” before taking any decision simply because they give different value to time (Miles, 2003). This suggests that their self-observation strategy develops over longer periods of time than those of short-term oriented individuals. Moreover, as Miles (2003) observed, we often hear Westerners saying that “time is money”, meaning that they expect issues to be solved in relatively short time periods, but other cultures, such as the Chinese, consider that time is not “of the essence” in important interactions. This situation is reflected, for example, in Chinese and Western negotiation styles. Why do Chinese negotiators consider time as important to “reach the best solution” while Westerners often consider that “time should not be wasted”? Moreover, time itself may be a source of natural reward in long-term oriented cultures.

In regard to self-leadership, the future orientation dimension should be considered together with other culture dimensions, namely masculinity versus femininity and individualism versus collectivism, because they are interrelated. Given our discussion above regarding these dimensions, we propose that long-term orientation resembles and enhances the characteristics of feminine and collective cultures: focus on social relationships. Likewise, short-term orientation shares similarities with masculinity and individualist cultures (i.e. focus on tasks). As such we could say that self-leadership may be exercised with different degrees of future orientation depending on cultural characteristics.

- P5a.* Individuals in cultures with long-term orientations are more likely to practise long-term self-leadership.
- P5b.* Individuals in cultures with short-term orientations are more likely to practise short-term self-leadership.

Using Hofstede’s culture dimensions within the self-leadership context has identified some important considerations and opportunities for applying self-leadership cross-culturally. Table II provides a summary of our analysis of self-leadership

through Hofstede’s culture dimensions and identifies the proposed types of self-leadership practices that are likely to occur in different cultures. These definitions and propositions form the groundwork for applying self-leadership across diverse cultures.

Conclusions

In this paper we have reviewed Hofstede’s culture dimensions and examined self-leadership from this cross-cultural perspective. Given its definition we consider self-leadership to be a quasi-universal theory: a set of behavioral and constructive strategies aiming the enhancement of personal effectiveness. Three main conclusions can be drawn from our analysis. First, the examination of self-leadership from a global perspective should not be made independent of cultural dimensions as its application is indeed dependent on them. Second, considering self-leadership through each of Hofstede’s culture dimensions suggests that the components of self-leadership should take into consideration that:

- high power distance raises the importance of the symbolic value of tasks and correspondent covert processes;
- high uncertainty avoidance makes more explicit the importance of non-rational, intuition-based thought processes;
- collectivism shows the relevance of social relations;
- femininity reiterates the importance of social relations and non-rational processes; and
- long-term orientation introduces the importance of making time an explicit element (see Table I).

Third, a cross-cultural analysis of self-leadership calls for change, adaptation, and extension of its current components. Emerging from this analysis is the strong likelihood that self-leadership can have quite different meanings across cultural contexts. Moreover, our cultural analysis of self-leadership suggests that self-leadership is conceptually robust and may have a broad range of application.

In our view, some of the features of self-leadership may actually be highly related with other leadership theories. A notable example of this is shared leadership (Pearce and Conger, 2003a, b). For example, as outlined in Table II, the individualist (collectivist) dimension suggests that self-leadership can range from individual-centered to group-centered. On the other hand, the masculine (feminine) dimension suggests that self-leadership may vary from material-based to relational-based. So self-leadership in collectivist and/or feminine cultures may

Table II.
The practice of self-leadership through Hofstede’s culture dimensions

Hofstede’s culture dimensions	Features of self-leadership	
	High	Low
Power distance	Restricted/contingent self-leadership	Autonomous self-leadership
Uncertainty avoidance	Normative self-leadership	Entrepreneurial self-leadership
Individualist-collectivist	Personal-centered self-leadership	Relations-centered self-leadership
Masculinity-femininity	Material-based self-leadership	Relational-based self-leadership
Future orientation	Long-term self-leadership	Short-term self-leadership

conceptually significantly overlap with the notion of shared leadership. Just as Pearce and Conger (2003b) question whether shared leadership can exist in all cultural settings, we have raised questions about the form, nature, and relevance of self-leadership in other cultures and developed testable propositions.

Further theoretical and empirical research is needed to investigate the practice of self-leadership in other cultures. At the theoretical level, we identify four potential research areas. The first is about the role of relationships in self-leadership. Until now self-leadership has focused more on effective performance of tasks rather than in the effective fulfillment of social and cultural expectations. We believe that this is an important area for future research. The second area of research concerns the role of communication and language in self-leadership. A better understanding of self-leadership in other cultures requires us to consider thinking and language as interrelated and mutually influenced concepts. Moreover, we should also investigate whether the relation between language and thinking is the same for every culture. Third, as we and other researchers have observed, self-leadership is a multilevel phenomenon and as such there should more research explain interdependencies between levels. Finally, as with any type of cross-cultural analysis, we think that there should be more research about the role of ethics and self-leadership. At the empirical level, in line with Neubert and Wu (2006), we think that there is need for country-by-country studies that develop an instrument of self-leadership that is relevant and applicable to other cultures.

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