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Cross-cultural leadership: leading around the world

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Situational models of leadership have been discussed since the mid-1960s. In this paper, we review the evidence concerning one such contextual variable, societal culture. The traditional cross-cultural literature shows how culture affects the kind of leadership characteristics, attributes, and behaviors desired and believed to be important in a society. The research also shows that culture moderates the outcomes resulting from different styles of leadership. The newly emerging global leadership literature focuses on leadership when followers are culturally diverse. We review the current state of these literatures and provide research suggestions.

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A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.

Lao Tzu (circa 500 BC)

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.

John Quincy Adams

The question of what leadership is and how to best practice it has been discussed and debated for centuries. As demonstrated by the quotes above, the meaning and power of leadership derives at least in part from the culture from which it is drawn. Early social science leadership research did not recognize this and it sought to identify universal traits or competencies possessed by all leaders [1]. However, starting in the mid-1960s, research on the situational determinants of leadership, i.e., the contextualized approach to leadership, has grown and this approach appears viable.

Leadership is not a property of an individual, although some individual traits affect it. Rather, leadership is an

asymmetric influence process that arises when two or more individuals interact [2]. Specifically, while all interacting individuals influence each other, the leader has greater influence than the others. Leaders influence the attitudes, motives, behaviors, and value saliency of followers [3,4] to facilitate the group's success and effectiveness [5]. While the leader's role can be fulfilled by multiple people (e.g. [6]) and while some have discussed self-leadership (followers enacting leadership themselves; [7]), the present discussion is restricted to reviews of cross-cultural studies involving single leaders.

In this paper, we will first discuss evidence concerning whether societal culture affects preferred leadership styles in different countries. Next we review the literature examining whether the effectiveness of leadership styles differs by culture. Finally, we discuss the global leadership literature that asks what style is ideal when leading a global community and trying to get them to work toward a common goal. We conclude with a discussion of research implications.

Societal culture and leadership styles

The leadership style that emerges within an interaction depends upon various situational factors. Early theories emphasized follower expertise level and the degree of task structure [2] as determinants of leadership style effectiveness. More recent work has discussed the importance of the medium (i.e., face-to-face versus virtually) through which individuals interact [8,9], as well as organizational/societal culture [5,10]. Indeed, societal culture can be a powerful factor that shapes who is seen as a leader and which leaders are effective.

Leadership styles around the world

The role of societal culture and how it affects desired and effective leadership has been explored for quite some time. Starting in the early 1990s, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavioral Effectiveness (GLOBE) project sought to identify universal leadership attributes as well as to determine if organizational/societal culture predicts culturally contingent leadership attributes [10,11]. While others had previously examined these questions (e.g. [12,13]), GLOBE dwarfed prior work in terms of number of respondents (17 000), number of countries sampled (62), number of organizations (over 1000) and industries (3) surveyed, variety of leadership attributes (128 items) examined, and number of research methods (e.g., questionnaire, focused group, media analysis) used. These 128 leadership items collapsed into six global leadership dimensions. These dimensions are: (a) Autonomous (independent and individualistic), (b)

Table 1

GLOBE 2004 results for the relationship between societal culture and leadership expectations.

Societal culture	Desired Leadership Behaviors					
	Autonomous	Charismatic	Humane oriented	Participative	Self-protective	Team oriented
Assertiveness			+	–		
Future orientation		+	+			+
Gender egalitarianism		+		+	–	
Humane orientation	–	+	+	+		+
In-group collectivism		+			–	+
Institutional collectivism	–					
Performance orientation	+	+	+	+	–	+
Power distance		–		–	+	
Uncertainty avoidance			+	–	+	+

Note: ‘+’ indicates significant positive relationship; ‘–’ indicates a significant negative relationship.

Charismatic (inspirational, motivational and high performance expectations for followers), (c) Humane-oriented (supportive, compassionate, and generous behaviors), (d) Participative (followers involved in decision making and implementation), (e) Self-protective (status and face-saving behaviors to reinforce group’s sense of security), and (f) Team-oriented (team building behaviors and implementation of a common goal).

GLOBE found only a small number of universal leadership attributes/behaviors (e.g., trustworthy, decisive, informed). The majority of leader attributes/behaviors were culturally contingent and their desirability was significantly related to culture [11]. GLOBE’s obtained culture-leadership relationships are summarized in Table 1. As can be seen, autonomous leadership was more desired in performance-oriented societies but less so in collectivistic and humane-oriented societies. Charismatic leadership was more desired in gender egalitarian, future-oriented, humane-oriented, collectivistic, and performance-oriented cultures but less so in high power distance societies.

GLOBE is the largest study of cross-cultural leadership differences, but it is not the only research on this topic. Aycan and colleagues [14] examined the psychological distance between an ideal leader and several different leadership (paternalism, transformational, nurturing¹) styles. They found that transformational leadership was the most connected to ideal leadership in all of the six countries examined. Paternalistic leadership (i.e., caring, protecting, and guidance on work and non-work matters) was closer to ideal leadership in power distant and collectivistic societies than in egalitarian and individualistic societies. Participants from power distant and collectivistic cultures viewed paternalistic, nurturing, and authoritarian

leadership equal in similarity to ideal leadership. Bealer and Bhanugopan [15] likewise reported several leadership style differences across countries from their expatriate survey. For example, United Arab Emirates managers were less transformational and more passive-avoidant than US and European managers. Finally, Aktas and colleagues [16] found that societies with strong social norms (tight cultures) were more likely to endorse autonomous leadership and less likely to endorse team-oriented and charismatic leadership than societies with weaker social norms (loose cultures).

The meaning of ethical leadership even differs across cultures. For example, Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck [17] report that Eastern societies more strongly associate ethical leadership such traits like modesty, openness to others’ ideas, and personal detachment from material success than do Western societies. In Western societies, ethical leadership is more strongly associated with transactional leadership behaviors than in Eastern societies. These differences probably explain why participants from different cultures disagree in interpreting the same scenario as an ethical dilemma [18]. However, there are universal attributes of ethical leaders. For example, honesty, integrity, coherent set of moral values, fairness, and transparency [17,19^{*}] are all universal ethical attributes.

In summary, these studies and others [20–24] support the hypothesis that societal culture affects who is perceived to be a leader and what leadership styles look like. Leadership is important because it is believed to influence the attainment of important organizational goals as well as team motivation, satisfaction, organizational commitment and morale. We will now examine whether culture moderates the effectiveness of various leadership styles to attain these outcomes.

Leadership effectiveness around the world

Early work on transformational leadership tended to interpret results as demonstrating the universal effectiveness of this style. More recently, research has extended

¹ Paternalistic leaders create a family work environment, establishing close and personalized relationships with subordinate and getting involved in employee non-work life. Nurturing leaders provide parent-like care and support to subordinates in exchange for high performance. The expectation in this leadership is high job performance whereas paternalistic leaders’ primary expectation is loyalty and deference [14].

this approach and found that while some leadership styles may be universally effective, other styles differ in effectiveness across countries and cultures. For example, Jackson et al. [25[•]] meta-analysis on the relationship between different leadership styles and organizational commitment (an individual's psychological attachment to an organization) found that some leadership relationships are universal. Specifically, culture did not moderate the positive relationship between having an emotional desire to remain a member of an organization (affective commitment) and transformational leadership. Similarly, the relationship between affective commitment and leaders who provide tangible rewards to exceptional followers (contingent reward) or who interact with followers only when their performance deviates from expectations (management-by-exception) was the same across all cultures. However, they found that the influence of transformational leadership to increase followers' sense of obligation to the organization (normative commitment) was stronger in collectivistic cultures.

Paternalistic and empowering² leadership also have differing effects across cultures (see also the review on culture and teams by Kirkman, Shapiro, Lu, & McGurrin for further discussion of leader empowering behaviors on teams). Ersoy and associates [26] found that empowering and paternalistic leadership had equal effects on whether employees help each other and go beyond required tasks to benefit their organization (organizational citizenship behaviors: OCBs) in Turkey whereas empowering leadership had stronger effects than paternalistic leadership on OCBs in the Netherlands. Moreover, Raub and Robert [27] examined the influence of empowering leadership on organizational commitment and employees taking an active part in modifying organizational practices (employee voice). They predicted that empowering leadership would positively affect these outcomes in societies that expect leaders to work closely with followers (low power distance societies) and weaker in societies that expect power is concentrated with the leader (high power distance societies). This is exactly what they found. In addition, cross-cultural differences were found for the outcomes of ethical leadership [28] and leader-member-exchange quality [29,30].

In 2014, GLOBE published the results of their cross-cultural CEO leadership effectiveness study [5]. They surveyed and interviewed 1060 CEOs as well as over 5000 top management team (TMT) members in 24 countries [11,31]. GLOBE found that culture did not directly influence actual leader behavior or leadership effectiveness. Rather, culture affected the leadership style desired in a society and it was the desired leadership style that actually influenced actual CEO leadership behavior.

Indeed, CEOs were more effective in building team morale and having a competitive firm the more strongly CEO actual behavior matched the leadership style desired in his/her society. In summary, these studies and others establish that leadership behavior [32–35] and competencies [36] more often than not have different outcomes across cultures.

Global leadership: one style to rule them all?

The previously discussed research identified differences in leadership styles and leadership outcomes among a group of a priori identifiable relatively culture-homogenous followers. In contrast to this literature, there is growing interest in what happens when a leader's followers come from diverse cultures. Leadership aware of these types of followers is called global leadership and this literature focuses on the process of influencing a global community to adopt a shared vision and work together toward a common objective [37^{••},38].

Interest in global leadership is increasing because of the belief that the nature of work has fundamentally changed [39^{••}]. Specifically, pressures caused by globalization, competition, deadlines, and technology innovation have increased the complexity, ambiguity, and diversity of the work environment [40,41]. As a result, leaders work with a culturally diverse group of followers that have different expectations regarding leadership. Generalization from the traditional cross-cultural literature would suggest that to be effective, the leader has to change styles to match each member's cultural expectations.

Instead of expecting a leader to become a chameleon, global leadership researchers argue that there is a common core of competencies required by all such leaders [39^{••},42,43]. Global leaders need to manage interpersonal relationships by being interpersonally engaged, interested in their social environment, and emotionally intelligent [42,44]. They need to be nonjudgmental, tolerant of ambiguity [42,45[•]], self-confident, optimistic, and emotionally resilient [42]. These competencies help them moderate the frequency of conflicts, miscommunications, and tensions that arise with culturally diverse groups.

In addition to the aforementioned competencies, the global leader needs a 'global mindset' [40,46,47[•],48]. Mindsets are mental processes (e.g., schemas/scripts) that influence the way people interpret and behave in situations. A global mindset predisposes the leader to mediate between and integrate across cultural diversity and 'strategic realities' [40] that occur with culturally diverse followers who might be geographically scattered. Such a mindset is more likely to be developed in people with a cosmopolitan outlook and who are cognitively complex³ [42,49]. The cosmopolitan

² Empowering leadership focuses on information sharing, delegation of authority and increased employee autonomy.

³ Cognitive complexity is the motivation and ability to understand and integrate multiple perspectives on a given issue [50].

outlook, along with personal experience [39^{••}], facilitates the development of rich schemas about expected local behavior (i.e., domestic mindset) whereas cognitive complexity facilitates leaders' ability to switch from local to global mindsets as the situation demands. Thus, the global mindset and this switching ability enhance leaders' cultural agility.

Research on global leadership has just begun but there is growing support for this general approach. For example, Story and associates [51] found that physical distance negatively moderates the influence of global leaders on followers. However, consistent with predictions, global leaders who have certain psychological competencies (i.e., efficacy, resilience, optimism) can influence their followers despite physical separation. Butler and associates [33] found that leaders who were more self-aware were more effective in almost all cultural contexts. Global leaders, as a group, are more emotionally stable, outgoing, and well-informed than the average person [45[•],52]. Finally, a global mindset develops and strategic thinking improves leaders' global work experiences [53]. In summary, this growing literature is supportive of the global leader competence framework.

Conclusion and directions for future research

The cross-cultural leadership research has clearly demonstrated that societal culture affects leader behavior and the effectiveness of different leadership styles when followers are relatively culturally homogenous. These findings are consistent with Vroom and Jago's [2] conclusions about the critical role that situational context, in general, plays in the leader-follower relationship. Consistent with the cross-cultural leadership literature, 'situations shape how leaders behave' and 'situations influence the consequences of leader behavior' [2].

Global leadership scholars introduced a new question into this literature. What should a leader do when followers from different cultures have to work together to solve a common task in an ambiguous, complex, and diverse work context? This literature has focused less on behaviors and more on leader competencies/mindsets needed to enhance leader cultural agility so that a shared vision and functional team procedures can be developed. Global leadership is emerging as a critical issue because new environmental (i.e., globalization), technological (allowing simultaneous task input from different sources and virtual meetings), and competitive pressures have created a context not previously seen.

The majority of the traditional cross-cultural leadership literature has focused on cognitive aspects of leadership. This is insufficient. Emotions play an important role in any relationship and so it is reasonable for them to play a role in the leader-follower relationship as well. This construct is not systematically studied in the traditional

cross-cultural leadership literature and only somewhat acknowledged in the global leadership literature (e.g., such leaders need emotional intelligence). Future research should investigate the role that emotions play cross-culturally in leader-follower interactions. What limits does culture place on the range of permissible emotion-related leader behavior? Does culture moderate follower consequences of leader emotion-related behavior (passion for vision). How do leaders use emotion to facilitate team development of culturally diverse followers?

Another avenue for research concerns how international leaders effectively balance both domestic and global leadership behaviors. The literature argues that effective global leaders repeatedly switch between domestic to global mindsets as a function of contextual requirements. What contextual triggers signal the global leader to switch one mindset to another? What is the process by which global leaders facilitate the melding of international followers into a common group?

Finally, the global leadership literature has primarily focused on identification of universal competencies. Future research should explore how these competencies manifest in different cultures or combinations of follower cultures. The competence-behavior connection needs to be explicated to build effective international leadership development programs. Also, examining global leader behaviors will build a bridge across the gap between this literature and the traditional cross-cultural leadership literature. When do these two literatures align and when do they contradict?

Conflict of interest statement

No payment of any kind has been given nor promised to me, Juliet Aiken, Joo Park or Junjie Su (all coauthors of this paper) in exchange for our agreeing to write this paper for 'Current Opinions in Psychology, which we agreed to do after being invited to do so. This paper's substance reflects what we learned from reading and reviewing the literature regarding the influence of societal culture on desired leadership styles and outcomes of leadership. We also reviewed the literature on global leadership and suggested a reconciliation with of the global leadership literature with the broader cross-cultural leadership literature.

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