



# The influence of supportive leadership and job characteristics on work alienation: A six-country investigation

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## Abstract

This study examines the relationships between supportive leadership and job characteristics and workers' alienation in Cuba, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Russia, and the United States. One thousand and nine hundred and thirty-three workers and non-managerial personnel participated in the research. Supportive leadership and job characteristics were found to be related to alienation. Evidence is provided along with implications for theory and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

This research addresses the issue of managing employees by asking them what are the conditions at work that create alienation; and, further, we wish to know if these conditions generalize across countries. The countries included in our sample were: Cuba, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Russia, and the U.S. This research seeks to contribute to global alienation theory, and to assist managerial understanding of the conditions that foster alienation among workers in their national context.

There are practical reasons for undertaking this research because alienation has been found to be associated with a host of individual outcomes, including protestant work ethic, locus of control, work self-discipline, job involvement, and affective organiza-

tional commitment (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000). In Australia, alienation correlated significantly with anxiety and unfavorable attitudes towards authority (Heaven & Bester, 1986). Earlier research found negative associations between alienation, work performance and attendance history (Cummings & Manring, 1977). Collectively, alienation describes a phenomenon that undermines sense of self, employee attitudes, business purpose, and social networks.

Even with this evidence, organizational theorists who have conducted empirical research on alienation have done little to provide explicit evidence of the *global* nature of work alienation. Beyond single country studies of alienation (Allen & LaFollette, 1977; Eden & Leviatan, 1974; Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000; Hodson, 1996; Kanungo, 1990; Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang, 1981; Lang, 1985; Michaels, Cron, Dubinsky, & Joachimsthaler, 1988; Michaels, Dubinsky, Kotabe, & Lim, 1996; Mirowsky & Ross, 1990; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986; Saunders, O'Neill, & Jensen, 1986; Singh, Singh, & Rani, 1996), we identified dual country research (Agarwal, 1993; Heaven & Bester, 1986), and examples of two seven-country-research studies,

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respectively (Kamano, 1999; Michaels et al., 1996). On the basis of published evidence, one can infer that the *global* nature of work alienation is more of a theoretical proposition than an empirical finding. This is interesting in itself given that alienation has long been treated as a global construct (Marx, 1844) and is currently a facet of global work norms articulated by the United Nations in its Millennium Development Goals for 2015, which calls for “decent and productive jobs” (United Nations, 2006).

The purpose of this research is to examine how work conditions may have a general influence on worker experiences of alienation. Specifically, we examine:

- (1) differences of alienation types across countries;
- (2) a model of work conditions that focuses on alienation across countries.

### 1.1. Country categories and theoretical background

This research is grounded in the view that alienation can be understood by examining its sources in multiple nations that differ culturally while holding job type reasonably constant (Kamano, 1999). Accordingly, we examined employees holding clerical and administrative positions in six countries. We conjectured that antecedents of alienation from different countries would be based on different reasons. That is, workers may experience a deep sense of psychological disengagement personally and from others and that structural factors at work should contribute to this experience. Because nations differ on a wide range of general cultural values, it is unknown how organizational context, such as management practices (e.g., supportive leadership and job characteristics) may influence experiences of worker alienation in different nations. The promise that employees will all prefer work conditions based on Western values is an “uncritical adaptation” of management practices (Aycan et al., 2000, p. 193). Research in India, for example, showed that collectivist values influence the saliency of employee needs. Indian workers prefer jobs that are instrumental to achieving family welfare (Kanungo, 1990). Managers must behave consistently with collectivist values because they are hiring and directing workers who are connected to extended networks of family and community. Indian managers are obligated to uphold the sanctity of these relationships (Hofstede, 2001, p. 237). National culture research shows that common values persist despite modernization and that “the nation remains a key unit of shared experience, and its educational and cultural institutions shape the values

of almost everyone in that society” (Ingelhart & Baker, 2000, p. 37).

The hypothesis that culture influences what is deemed acceptable in society/work is a fundamental premise of several important culture research projects, most recently the Globe Studies of 62 societies (House, Hanges, Mansour, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). House and colleagues studied the relationship of national culture and what they call culturally endorsed implicit leadership theory (CLT). They hypothesize that cultural values shape the degree to which employees accept the influence of a particular leadership style. For example, leadership that provides participative decision-making to employees will be “commonly accepted in the individualistic West” but will be of “questionable effectiveness in the collectivist East” (p. 51). Since values shape implicit assumptions about leadership in societies, alignment of leadership style with employee implicit assumptions will be crucial to motivation, performance, and employee sense of belonging or estrangement at work.

There are many excellent cultural paradigms that have applicability to cross-cultural research (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004; Ingelhart & Baker, 2000; Ronen & Shenkar, 1985; Schwartz, 1999; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990; Trompenaars, 1993). In the present research, we used the Hofstede framework because it is the most widely recognized and extensively tested in work settings. A recent review noted that Hofstede’s work has been cited more than 1800 times in academic research and has been employed in 180 articles published in top-tier business and psychology journals (Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006). Hofstede identified five cultural dimensions in his program of research across 50 countries, these are: *individualism/collectivism* which is the degree to which employees look out for themselves or remain integrated into the group; *power distance* which is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally; *uncertainty avoidance* which is the extent to which a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations; *masculinity* which is the distribution of emotional roles between the genders; and *long-term orientation* which is the extent to which a culture programs its members to accept delayed gratification or their material, social, and emotional needs.

Our expectation about how culture will influence experiences of alienation in different countries is guided by a country categorization rationale that references two of Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions:

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