



Cultures have consequences: A configural approach to leadership across two cultures



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ABSTRACT

This research compares the influence of country membership and cultural values (power distance and individualism/collectivism) in a model of LMX and organizational change. The results reveal cultural differences in the relationships among LMX, consultation and affective commitment to organizational change, supporting prior studies. However, there are substantial differences in the moderation of the cultural values in the relationships among the research constructs at the individual level. Our results suggest that understanding national culture and its influence on leadership may be incomplete when we focus only on mean differences at the country level to examine cross-cultural differences. To address this concern, we offer a configural approach to examine the role of culture in a leadership model across two cultures (the U.S. and Korea).

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Introduction

The study of organizational behavior, particularly leadership, has reflected longstanding debates regarding whether leadership varies across nations or whether leadership constructs are generalizable across cultures (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999; Zhang et al., 2012).

While emic researchers focus on understanding behaviors from the perspective of cultural insiders, those with an etic perspective seek commonalities and differences across cultures (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). These assumptions have led scholars to adopt different theoretical lenses and methodologies (Morris et al., 1999). For example, etic researchers (e.g., Pillai, Scandura, & Williams, 1999; Ramesh & Gelfand, 2010) adopted Hofstede's (2001) categorization of national cultures without testing for potential differences in cultural values across more than one culture. Comparing mean scores of countries' cultural values, these studies assumed cultural heterogeneity across nations and homogeneity within nations. In contrast, emic researchers (e.g., Ensari & Murphy, 2003; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001; Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, & Lawler, 2000) focus on cultural values that individuals possess within a society. The emphasis from this perspective is on understanding local voices and phenomena in specific cultures.

Despite the contributions of both approaches, these two streams of research have produced ambivalent results when examining the generalizability of leadership models. Consensus has not emerged regarding the uniformity or homogeneity of cultural values' influence on attitudes and behaviors within countries. Therefore, it is necessary to address the role of cultural values in the experience and outcomes of leadership both within and between cultures. More specifically, current meta-analytic research on culture and leadership (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2011; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006; Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012) indicates

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that national culture and cultural orientations are important for understanding employees' perceptions of leadership and antecedents and outcomes of leadership. In addition, the GLOBE studies (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) suggest that there are implicit schemas for leadership behaviors that may generalize across the 62 cultures studied. However, other research suggests that individuals' cultural values have differential effects on attitudes and behaviors. Recent meta-analyses have shown that membership in a particular country does not moderate the relationships between leader–member exchange (hereafter LMX) and employees' attitudes and behavior (Dulebohn et al., 2011; Rockstuhl et al., 2012). Rather, these relationships are moderated by cultural values of power distance and individualism (Dulebohn et al., 2011) as well as horizontal-individual vs. vertical-collectivistic cultures (Rockstuhl et al., 2012) that individuals possess. These studies argue that within-country (individual-level) variation in cultural values exists and can be larger than between country-level variation (Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009; Triandis, 1995).

Similar to the above arguments, prior studies (e.g., Bass, 1997; Lonner, 1980) suggested variform universals (the relationship holds but the manifestation of variables might differ across cultures), functional universals (the relationship is always found, but its magnitude differs across cultures), and variform-functional universals (a combination of the two). However, few studies have empirically identified the level of universality. More recently, Taras, Kirkman, and Steel (2010) and Tsui, Nifadkar, and Ou (2007) challenged the assumption that individuals in a specific country hold shared cultural values. These scholars suggest the need to consider configural properties that individuals may differently possess within a country as well as countries' unique cultural contexts. Configural properties refer to the asymmetry of individual characteristics within a group such as income disparity or value differences between people in contrasting regions of a country. Tsui et al. (2007) conclude that: “there is potential for interesting theory development by focusing on the variance of culture held by the individuals in a nation” (p. 461).

To address the above limitations and to expand the understanding of configural properties of cultures, we examine the generalizability of a U.S.-based model of LMX and organizational change in another culture (Korea). We focus on LMX, defined as the exchange relationship quality between supervisors and employees (Graen & Scandura, 1987), since leaders can play an important role in shaping employees' attitudes toward organizational change (e.g. Whelan-Berry, Gordon, & Hinings, 2003). Organizational change is contextually important, as its success or failure is contingent on employees' attitudes and reactions (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993; Piderot, 2000) and may depend on culture (Clugston, Howell, & Dorfman, 2000; Meyer, Srinivas, Lal, & Topolnysky, 2007).

Despite the importance of LMX and organizational change, few studies have investigated leadership and organizational change across cultures. Most LMX studies have been conducted in countries such as Australia and the U.K. that are culturally similar to the U.S. (Dulebohn et al., 2011). The U.S. and Korea are traditionally considered as individualistic-low power distance and collectivistic-high power distance countries, respectively (Hofstede, 2001). Data from Korea should be of particular interest as “culture is not static” (Tsui et al., 2007: 465) and cultural values tend to change more in transforming economies (Fertig, 1996). For example, Korea is reported to have a mixed culture due to the westernization of its society over the past 20 years (Liden, 2012). Therefore, a comparison study of leadership during organizational change in changing cultures may be especially relevant.

Overall, this paper has three purposes. First, we employ a configural approach to the study of LMX and organizational change across two cultures and make recommendations for future theory, research and practice on cultural differences in the leadership and organizational change literatures. From the etic perspective, we test a model in which country is a moderator of LMX and expected outcomes (U.S. vs. Korea). Then from an emic perspective, we examine the role of cultural values (e.g., power distance and individualism/collectivism) in the relationships between the constructs in the model across the two countries. Second, we propose that generalizations using the etic approach to leadership may be incomplete since there may be unique cultural values that explain the effects of leadership on outcomes. Third, we extend research on LMX in Korea, which is relatively understudied.

Theory and hypotheses

The focal model: LMX and affective commitment to organizational change

According to LMX theory, one of the ways that supervisors and followers develop relationship quality is through a series of reciprocated exchanges (Graen & Scandura, 1987). Supervisors tend to provide more social support and share valuable information with followers in high LMX relationships (Golden & Veiga, 2008). In return, followers offer valuable resources to supervisors such as extra effort and greater dedication to the supervisors' goals (Golden & Veiga, 2008). These exchanges provide mutual reinforcement resulting in personal obligation, gratitude, and trust (Blau, 1964). Thus, high LMX tends to shape employees' positive attitudes toward organizations, organizational commitment (Dulebohn et al., 2011), and organizational citizenship behavior (Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003). LMX is also positively related to positive reactions to organizational change (Van Dam, Oreg, & Schyns, 2008) and mitigates negative attitudes toward change (Furst & Cable, 2008; Tierney, 1999).

Affective commitment to organizational change (hereafter ACOC), defined as the desire to provide support for change based on a belief in its inherent benefits (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002), is a critical determinant of employees' support for organizational change and reduced cynicism (Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005; Herold, Fedor, & Caldwell, 2007; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Meyer et al., 2007). Although organizational change generally increases employee uncertainty (De Cuyper, De Witte, Vander Elst, & Handaja, 2010), mutual trust derived from high quality LMX can play an important role in increasing ACOC. Therefore, we propose that LMX contributes to employees' ACOC.

Consultation is defined as involvement in change when employees are “...immediately involved in decisions that affect them” (Morgan & Zeffane, 2003, p. 59). During organizational change, supervisors use various influence tactics such as sanctions, legitimation, consultation, and ingratiation (Furst & Cable, 2008). Consultation is a direct form of involvement in change (e.g.,

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