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# Blazing the trail versus trailing the group: Culture and perceptions of the leader's position

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that power triggers assertive action. However, people from different cultures might expect different types of action from powerful individuals such as leaders. In comparing cultural differences in leadership imagery, we find that Americans represent leaders standing ahead of groups, whereas Asians also represent leaders behind groups. We propose that front versus back positions embody two faces of leader action: individual assertion versus group-focused action. Studies 1a and 1b respectively employed etic and emic methods to demonstrate that Singaporeans were more likely than Americans to represent leaders behind groups. In Study 2, Singaporeans evaluated back leaders more favorably than Americans did, and group focus mediated cultural differences. Simulating the conditions under which cultural differences arise, Study 3 demonstrates that a primarily Western managerial sample primed with threat (versus opportunity) preferred back leaders. By describing cultural variations in imagery, we reveal more nuanced implicit theories of leader action.



## Introduction

> "Leadership involves finding a parade and getting in front of it" (Naisbitt, 1982, p. 162).
>
> "To lead the people, walk behind them" (Lao Tzu, cited in Grothe, 2004, p. 5–6).

People often assume that leaders head the pack, lead the charge, and blaze the trail (Grint, 2005; Northouse, 2001). The Oxford English Dictionary defines a leader as "the first man in a file, one in the front rank, one of the foremost in a moving body" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Pilots direct planes from the cockpit, and when a president enters a room, advisors often trail behind. Although military formations sometimes situate leaders at the rear (see Andrzejewski, 1954/2003), it seems overwhelmingly obvious and indeed natural that leaders would and should stand in front of the group.

However, consider an opposite image, also associated with leadership. Just as Lao Tzu advised leaders to walk behind followers, another classical Chinese philosopher, Sun Tzu (1963), warned that when an army's weight "is at the front not at the rear-although [it may be] massive, it is not firm" (p. 155). These quotations suggest that the association between social and physical position might reflect a cultural schema (e.g., McArthur & Post, 1977).

The present research explores cross-cultural variations in the imagery people associate with leadership to develop a more nuanced view of leader action. The image of the leader in front aligns with recent social psychological research demonstrating that powerful people such as leaders activate the behavioral approach system (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Higgins; 1997; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Powerful people initiate behavior (e.g., leaders as "agents of change," Bass, 1981; first offers in negotiations, Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007); seek rewards in the environment (French & Raven, 1959), feel uninhibited, and often fail to see others' perspectives (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), because they care less about what others think (Fiske, 1993). Although the leader in the front of the group is poorly positioned to monitor group members, he or she is well positioned to act assertively upon the environment. By contrast, we argue that the image of the leader behind the group aligns with Asian expectations about leader action. Specifically, the back leader can readily watch over the group to protect it from threats, disruption, and failure, consistent with Asian notions of paternalistic leadership (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Fahr, 2004).

By describing how preferences for these representations differ cross-culturally, we redefine the types of action people associate

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with leaders. Rather than assuming that power triggers assertive action only (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2003), we specify a dual-function model of leader action, with front versus back positions embodying assertive versus group-focused orientations (Kark & Van Dijk; 2007; Zhong, McGee, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2006). We hypothesize that when cultures emphasize individual assertion (e.g., the United States, Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000), their members perceptually represent leaders in front, breaking away from groups to exert their will on the environment (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007). In contrast, when cultures prioritize responsibilities to the group (e.g., Singapore; Chen, Ng, & Rao, 2005; Lee et al., 2000), their members also perceptually represent leaders behind groups to watch over and protect them. By describing how these perceptions differ cross-culturally, we reveal more nuanced expectations about leader action.

## Leadership imagery across cultures: simulating assertion versus group responsibility

Researchers define power as control over resources, and hence, over others' outcomes (Fiske, 1993; French & Raven, 1959; Keltner et al., 2003). Leadership, on the other hand, is the process of influencing others to accomplish tasks (Chemers, 2001). Noting these definitions, Giessner and Schubert (2007) contend that, although powerful people might not always be leaders, leaders always require power.

Rather than defining what power and leadership are, or describing how leaders might act, we draw from implicit leadership theory and assess people's lay understandings of leaders. In particular, we focus on how perceivers mentally represent the leader's physical position (Giessner & Schubert, 2007; Raghubir & Valenzuela, 2006; Schubert, 2005). Implicit theories are categorization schemas that help observers to simplify information (Phillips & Lord, 1986). Followers' reactions to leadership are more strongly shaped by their own, often automatic, construction than by the leader's objective traits and behaviors (Ritter & Lord, 2007; Schyns, Meindl, & Croon, 2007). As a result, followers afford leaders discretion and power based on the match between the leader's actual characteristics and their expectations of the leader, as captured by their leader prototype (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008; Ritter & Lord, 2007; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

The present investigation builds on implicit leadership theory in two ways. First, by focusing on one of the most basic elements of a leader prototype, the leader's physical position, we move beyond previous research that directly taps people's beliefs about leader behaviors (e.g., House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), and reveal the subtle ways in which people mentally simulate those behaviors. Second, we explore how the content of these theories might differ cross-culturally (House et al., 2004), showing that, in addition to the common Western association between power and assertive action, Asian contexts might feature other leader representations (Zhong et al., 2006), because people are more likely to expect leaders to protect the group.

### *Representing leader action through physical position*

Implicit theories have largely been assessed by directly tapping people's judgments about leaders. For instance, the GLOBE studies (House et al., 2004) explored cultural differences in people's expectations about leadership by asking participants from 62 countries to assess whether particular attributes impeded or facilitated leadership. The researchers confirmed that cultural values around leadership differed. Whereas 22 leader descriptors (e.g., *trustworthy*) were universal, another 35 (e.g., *sensitive*) were culturally contingent.

The present research similarly focuses on cross-cultural differences in implicit leadership theories, but we study a more subtle cue that shapes people's perceptions of leaders. Specifically, we study the leader's physical position, defined as the leaders' spatial orientation to the group, i.e., where leaders stand with respect to followers, how close they stand, whether they face followers or turn away from them (Taylor & Fiske, 1975), and more generally, how leaders occupy space (see Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Well before people begin to perceive others' traits and behaviors, they infer power through physical position (e.g., being seated at the head of the table, Bass & Klubeck, 1952). Likewise, people associate high vertical positions with power (Giessner & Schubert, 2007; Schubert, 2005) and believe that important or prominent people occupy central positions (Raghubir & Valenzuela, 2006). In the game show The Weakest Link, contestants who were randomly assigned to central locations within the group won more often than those in peripheral locations, because observers frequently applied the heuristic that "important people sit in the middle," which substituted for individuating performance information (Raghubir & Valenzuela, 2006). These associations seem to emerge over time as people form correlations between power and particular spatial locations in their environments (Giessner & Schubert, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Extant research on spatial orientation has explored hierarchy (up–down position, Giessner & Schubert, 2007; Schubert, 2005) and centrality (center–periphery position, Raghubir & Valenzuela, 2006; Taylor & Fiske, 1975). In spite of the prominence of recent conceptualizations of power as assertive action (Galinsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2003), physical representations of action have not yet been studied. The present research identifies two ways to physically represent a leader's action: positioning leaders in front of groups (trailblazers) versus behind groups (trailing behind, Fiske, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Whereas vertical and central positions depict stable power hierarchies (Giessner & Schubert, 2007; Raghubir & Valenzuela, 2006; Schubert, 2005), front-back positions represent leadership on a horizontal plane, dynamically simulating a group's forward progress towards specific goals (Boroditsky, 2000).

Physical position is crucial to leadership theory because it reflects a relatively primitive form of implicit theory. The front-back position in particular captures people's mental simulations of leader action, offering a more implicit and less formalized view of leadership perceptions (Barsalou, 1999). Physical position does not merely indicate literal spatial arrangements; it symbolizes social relationships, and reveals the rich perceptual apparatus that accompanies implicit theories of leadership (Barsalou, 1999; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Position influences both how people talk about leadership (e.g., "trailblazer," "ahead of the pack," versus "core team member"), and how people think about leaders (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Position can determine whom people treat as leaders (Bass & Klubeck, 1952; Raghubir & Valenzuela, 2006). Further, if leaders deviate from expected positions, this could reduce their conformity with prototypes and hence, perceptions of their effectiveness (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

These perceptions particularly matter to symbolic leadership theories, which argue that leaders use symbols to shape followers' sensemaking (Weick, 1987). Because an organization's environment constrains the leader's control over substantive activities (e.g., strategic decisions such as mergers/acquisitions), Pfeffer (1981) argued that leaders primarily engage in symbolic action. By initiating symbolic activities (such as ceremonies) and evoking imagery (e.g., through physical space), leaders develop shared paradigms among followers and convey their power and influence (Pfeffer, 1981).

Symbolic theories tend to be "leader-centric," focusing on how leaders can and should use symbols, rather than showing how followers interpret leader symbols. While Pfeffer noted the constraints that surround a leader's substantive decisions, we