

## The influence of nationality on followers' satisfaction with leadership: Evidence from Singapore and the United States

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### **Abstract:**

The long-standing argument is that leaders need to adapt their behaviors to the context, most specifically to meet the particular needs and expectations of followers from various parts of the world. An alternative viewpoint would be to ask whether people from different countries are looking for different or similar behaviors from their leaders. We provide a preliminary investigation of whether people from two cultures expect different leadership behaviors by comparing followers' satisfaction with the behaviors of their leaders in the United States and Singapore. Initial differences between the two countries faded in importance as life (age) and work experiences increased.

**Keywords:** leaders and followers | work experience | culture and leadership | leadership practices

### **Article:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership makes a difference most agree, but since there is no single best way to lead (Fiedler, 1971; House, 1971; Kouzes and Posner, 2012), scholars have examined how context influences leaders and followers (Cole et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2014; Hunter et al., 2007; Liden and Antonakis, 2009; Wang and Rode, 2010). The growth of globalization, with the rise of multinational corporations, distributed supply chains and workforces, along with ever-advancing technologies, has cast more attention on understanding the potential role of nationality in leadership (Chevrier, 2009; Dickson et al., 2003; House et al., 2011; Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003). This study extends this investigation by examining whether nationality influences followers' satisfaction with how their leaders behave.

Many studies suggest that culture can influence how followers think about and respond to leadership (Ergeneli et al., 2007; Gerstner and Day, 1994; House et al., 2011), and follower expectations of leaders can vary greatly by county or region (House et al., 1999). For example, Chinese cultural values moderated what followers expected from their leaders; those with relatively modern values demanded more integrity from their leaders than did followers with traditional Chinese values (Zhang et al., 2013). In collectivistic cultures, followers may be most

responsive to transformational leadership styles (Jung, Bass, and Sosik, 1995). Those from high power distance cultures may be more satisfied with authoritarian leadership (Smith et al., 1994; Den Hartog et al., 1999).

At the same time, some argue that globalization is a potentially powerful countervailing force to nationality influences (Guillen, 2001; Mitchell, 2001). Several studies suggest that national culture does not have much sway on individual behavior in organizations (Dorfman et al., 1997; Javidan and Carl, 2005; Parboteeah et al., 2013; Shin, 2004; Sparrow and Wu, 1998). Others propose that globalization is having a homogenizing effect on business practices, and as such, the influence of nationality on leadership practices is diminishing in importance (Zagorsek et al., 2004; Chiang and Birtch, 2007; Ergeneli et al., 2007; Peshawaria, 2011).

The research literature seems to suggest that two opposing forces are shaping the expectations followers have of their leaders. On the one hand, local cultural values (i.e., nationality) will influence followers to view leadership in idiosyncratic or culture-specific ways; followers from country X may be satisfied with one style of leadership, while those from country Y are not and expect their leaders to behave differently. This is an emic perspective, an approach to understanding a particular language or culture in terms of its internal elements and their functioning rather than in terms of any existing external scheme. In contrast, an etic perspective takes an approach that is general, nonstructural, and objective in its viewpoint, and postulates that the forces of global business practices should move follower expectations toward more universal norms, less significantly impacted by national customs and practices.

In this study, we used data from followers in the United States (US) and Singapore to explore these two perspectives and investigate to what extent will follower expectations of their leaders be influenced by nationality versus impacted by globalization (in the form of increasing amounts of work experience). Singapore and the US are both full and important participants in the global economy, but with different cultural values, which makes matching them a reasonable starting point for testing these influences.

The US is the largest national economy in the world, typically the default category when discussing Western values, and the culture in which most theories of leadership were developed (House and Aditya, 1997; Zagorsek et al., 2004). Like the US, Singapore has a fully developed, modern economy with all the infrastructure of modern business, significant international trade, and a high-level of per capita GDP (CIA, 2013). At the same time, there are important cultural differences between the two countries that might influence what behaviors followers expect from leaders. This study examined whether national culture or global norms had more influence on followers' expectations by comparing which leadership behaviors contributed to follower satisfaction in the two countries.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Effect of National Culture**

Culture refers to the fundamental beliefs and ways of thinking that sense of the world (Matsumoto and Juang, 2011). Hofstede's (2001) five-factor model, although not without its

critics, continues to be used most often in cross-cultural studies to characterize national culture (Chiang and Birtch, 2007; Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson, 2006; Newburry and Yakova, 2005; Sagie and Aycan, 2003; Sondergaard, 1994). Hofstede argued that five dimensions could usefully represent culture: power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Of particular importance in this study were the three dimensions where the US and Singapore have been reported to be most different, specifically power distance, individualism-collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance (both countries have moderate values on the masculinity-femininity dimension, and slightly low ones on long-term orientation; Hofstede, 2001).

*Power distance* is influential in shaping expectations of leaders because it is about the cultural value that defines the proper relationship between leaders and their followers (Hofstede, 2001; Ramaswami et al., 2013). Zhang and colleagues (2013) proposed that power distance was an important factor in explaining the difference between traditional and modern Chinese followers' expectations of leaders. They argued that followers subscribing to a belief in high power distance might not demand as much integrity from their leaders. High power distance followers would likely accept large differences in status and treatment between leaders and followers. They should be less likely to desire participation and consultation from their leaders. Singapore's high power distance score, relative to the US's moderately low one, consequently suggest that the two countries' followers might have quite different expectations of leaders.

*Individualism-collectivism*, as a cultural value, concerns the relative importance assigned to individual versus group goals (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). Individualist cultures place greater value on individual wants and needs, whereas collectivist cultures expect individuals to transcend or sacrifice their personal interests to work toward group goals. As a result, followers from collectivist cultures are more likely to support and obey leaders for the sake of harmonious solidarity. In addition, collectivist followers should be less concerned with participation and individual achievement, as their cultural values base success on group results. Therefore, consistent with its high observed correlation with power distance (Hofstede, 2001) collectivism should affect follower expectations in a fashion similar to that of power distance. Because Singapore is higher in collectivism than the US, and alternatively the US is higher in individualism than Singapore, followers from the two countries might have quite different expectations of how their leaders should behave.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the level of a culture's desire to control the future, or at least to avoid suffering from its unpredictability (Hofstede, 2001). High uncertainty avoidance cultures are more likely to create rules and institutions meant to increase their control over experiences and outcomes; they feel more anxious and are less willing to be subject to forces outside their control. In contrast, members of cultures that are low on uncertainty avoidance are more secure, less concerned about controlling the future and less threatened by the views and actions of others. In terms of leadership, these differences suggest that followers from high uncertainty avoidance cultures (like the US) will want greater participation in the leadership process. Rather than trusting in a leader or being willing to accept what comes of the leader's actions, these followers should desire input and control in order to reduce uncertainty (Zagorsek et al., 2004). High uncertainty avoidance followers should prefer leaders who allow greater power and participation, while the opposite would be true in lower uncertainty avoidance cultures like

Singapore. These contrasts imply that followers from the US and Singapore would have quite different expectations of leaders.

Taken together, the above discussion suggests that Singaporean followers, being from a culture that is higher in power distance, higher in collectivism, and lower in uncertainty avoidance than the US, would expect to be less directly involved with their leaders. That is, they would be likely be more content obeying traditional hierarchical authority; whereas, US followers would be more satisfied with leaders who directly involved them, encouraging them to take part in decisions and exercise influence. Accordingly, the types of leader behaviors that impact followers' satisfaction should not be the same in the two countries, resulting in the following hypothesis:

*H1: US and Singaporean followers satisfaction with their leader is influenced by different leadership behaviors.*

### Effect of Globalization

Hypothesis 1 derives from the influence of nationality or traditional national culture, without taking account of possible homogenizing effects from globalization (that is, participating in a world economy rather than a national one), and how this influences values convergence. In other words, although the culture in which people are raised will have a powerful influence on what they expect and desire from a leader, it can also be argued that the influences of national culture will be reduced or minimized by the forces of globalization given more and more time in the workplace. For example, an earlier study found that experienced Singaporean managers reported power distance and collectivism levels that were more similar to those of the US than the general norm in Singapore (Chew and Putti, 1995); the managers' values were still different from US ones, but less so than might be expected based on their different nationalities. Others have similarly found that cultural differences in leadership beliefs and reactions were relatively small among experienced workers (Zagorsek et al., 2004). Posner (2013), in examining the impact of leadership and nationality on employee engagement levels across numerous countries, found the impact of nationality was negligible in explaining employee engagement levels, while the impact of leadership was quite robust.

While globalization is undoubtedly comprised of a number of factors, organizational norms and practices are among the strongest agents of globalization (Miller, 1998; Mitchell, 2001). The more time individuals spend in the workplace, broadly expressed by years of work experience, the more likely they are subject to these organizational variables influencing their thinking versus factors associated with their national origin. Indeed, what exactly would be the cultural factors influencing, on the one hand, a German, with an EU passport, working in Shanghai, for a multinational firm founded and headquartered in the US? On the other hand, what would be the salient cultural influences on a Nigerian, educated in the US, working in Brazil, for a Korean manufacturing company? In both cases there are multiple, and undoubtedly, conflicting cultural pressures. The international GLOBE study has shown that organizational culture is at least as strong a predictor of leadership expectations as is national culture (Dickson et al., 2003; House et al., 2011). The forces of globalization and organizational culture are acting on all businesses and their workforces, and consequently with greater work experience comes more exposure to global culture norms, accompanied by a dampening effect on forces influenced by nationality.

Accordingly, the second hypothesis is that followers' expectations of their leaders will become more similar as levels of work experience increase.

*H2: Work experience will reduce the differences between expectations that followers in the US and Singapore have of their leaders' behaviors.*

## Leadership Model

Our leadership model was the framework proposed by Kouzes and Posner (2017). Their Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership identifies leadership practices distilled from hundreds of reports of exceptional leadership from a range of diverse, international sources (Posner, 2015). Each of The Five Practices consists of specific behaviors and actions leaders take with themselves and others. They are:

*Model the Way (MTW):* Leaders clarify values and set the example. They examine their own values and understand how they align with those of their followers and their organization. They are able to articulate those shared values and act in accordance with them. Leaders set the example through behavior consistent with the shared values of the team and the larger organization.

*Inspire a Shared Vision (ISV):* Leaders envision an uplifting future and enlist others in common aspirations. To inspire a shared vision, leaders engage people in giving voice to their aspirations, linking with their motivations and their interests. To stimulate others to follow a shared vision, leaders enable their followers to see that they are part of something important which can only be accomplished by working together.

*Challenge the Process (CTP):* Leaders actively search for opportunities for improvement. In order to learn from experience they are willing to take risks and innovate. They are willing to challenge the status quo and face the unknown. They encourage idea-generation and experimentation and help their followers to learn from failure as well as success.

*Enable Others to Act (EOA):* Leaders empower their followers by fostering collaboration, building trust, increasing self-determination, and developing competence. They are willing to share power and offer latitude in how others do their work. They promote teamwork by helping followers develop the confidence and capabilities necessary to succeed together. They focus not on personal accomplishment, but on building trust within the work group and promoting a climate of collaboration.

*Encourage the Heart (ETH):* Leaders tap into the motivational power of reinforcement by both recognizing individual contributions to the team's success and creating a spirit of community by celebrating the group's accomplishments. They demonstrate genuine concern for followers by connecting what people have done with the success of the group. By linking recognition and rewards to performance, leaders help followers to understand how their behavior upholds the values of the organization. By showing that they personally have the best interests of others in mind, leaders encourage a team spirit that carries them all through tough times.

The research leading to The Five Practices framework began with case studies and systematic interviews with managers and their constituents, across a wide variety of public and private sector organizations around the world, about “personal best” experiences as leaders. These behaviors and actions were systematically analysed and categorized into common themes or practices. The framework has been in use for over thirty years, both in applied leadership development settings and more than 700 research projects ([www.leadershipchallenge.com](http://www.leadershipchallenge.com)). More than five million participants, representing over 70 countries, have completed surveys associated with The Five Practices framework, making it a clear-cut and well-established means of conceptualizing leadership that is applicable across cultures (Amnuckmanee, 2002; Posner, 2015; Zagorsek et al., 2004, 2006).

## METHODS

The sample purposefully included respondents who were part of an educational environment, rather than from a corporate setting, in order to minimize the possible influence of global business practices. Respondents completed the *student* version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (S-LPI; Kouzes and Posner, 2005). The S-LPI is an instrument specifically developed to measure leadership behavior for participants in formal educational programs, and suited for individuals without substantive formal workplace experience (Posner, 2004, 2012, 2014). It has demonstrated comparable psychometric properties with the *classic* form of the Leadership Practices Inventory, typically administered in corporate settings and mostly with respondents holding hierarchical organizational positions (Posner and Kouzes, 1993; Posner, 2015).

The S-LPI is a 360-degree feedback survey completed online. Individual leaders select the followers from whom they would like feedback, and these followers provide an anonymous assessment of how frequently the leader engages in various leadership behaviors, and how satisfied they are with various aspects of the leadership provided. The S-LPI includes six items to measure each of the five leadership practices (model, inspire, challenge, enable, and encourage), using five-point Likert scales. In this sample, all Cronbach alpha coefficients were at or above .83 for all five leadership practices.

Three factors measured followers’ satisfaction with their leader: their overall satisfaction with the leadership, their identification with the leader in terms of their pride in telling others they were working with this leader, and their level of productivity because of working with this leader. All items were measured using five-point Likert scales, and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .91 for the leader satisfaction scale. A pilot study, involving over 500 respondents, found this scale to be consistent ( $r = .72, p < .01$ ) with the three-item “satisfaction with supervisor” scale from the Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Exploratory factor analysis of the six items representing the two satisfaction measures strongly suggested a single factor solution. Parallel analysis, the scree plot, and examination of eigenvalues all indicated that the two scales were measuring the same underlying factor.

The sample consisted only of followers, not the leaders themselves. Created were two categories of work experience based on respondent age: The low work experience group consisted of college-age respondents aged 18-23 years, while respondents aged 28-33 years comprised the moderate work experience group. Accordingly, the first group approximated those people with

presumably little to no work experience, while the second group involved people post-baccalaureate with anywhere from five to ten years of work experience. The sample respondents were all young people, among whom work experience should be the most important difference. The net result was a sample involving four groups in a 2x2 matrix: 232 US followers and 235 Singaporean followers in the low work experience group, and in the moderate work experience groups were 234 US followers and 199 Singaporean followers.

Admittedly, there may be small or arbitrary differences between those at the high end of the first category and those at the low end of the second category, which is an unavoidable consequence of establishing a cutoff point. The two age groups reflected a sample of each nation's workforce with a moderate amount of work experience (aged 28-33 years) and inexperienced or relatively "low" workplace experience (18-23 years of age). The sixteen-year age range in the sample also seemed a reasonable representation of work experience because this is less than the 25-30 year span typically associated with a generation (Berger, 1960). The sample, therefore, should exclude any significant generational differences, and provide a clearer test of predictions concerning the impact of work experience (globalization) on followers' expectations of leaders.

To assess the measurement properties of the scales, we conducted a maximum likelihood estimation confirmatory analysis. The hypotheses were tested using ordinary least-squares regression in each group, using satisfaction with leader as the dependent variable. The satisfaction score was an indicator of expectations, assuming that followers' satisfaction with their leader would be directly related with the extent to which they met their expectations (Shondrick et al., 2010) The five leadership practices were entered as predictors, so that significant values would indicate which leader behaviors were associated with greater follower satisfaction in each group.

## RESULTS

A confirmatory factor analysis yielded a satisfactory fit with the data ( $X^2=2472.21$ ,  $df=579$ ,  $CFI=.90$ ,  $RMSEA=.06$ ), and all items loaded significantly on the appropriate construct at .57 or above. These results suggest that the measures performed well (Bagozzi and Edwards, 1998). Multicollinearity diagnostics were addressed in all regression models, and the largest variance inflation factor (VIF) was 5.8; and VIF values up to 10 are considered acceptable (Neter et al., 1996), suggesting that multicollinearity was not a threat to these analyses. Although collected from a single source, since the focus was with the patterns across sample groups, common method variance was not a significant concern for these analyses (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 1 presents the regression results. Model 1 shows that four types of leadership practices predicted the low work experience US followers' satisfaction: Inspire, Challenge, Enable, and Encourage. That is, the more of these behaviors followers saw in their leader, the more satisfied they were with that leader. In contrast, Model 2 shows that only two types of leadership practices predicted low work experience Singaporean followers' satisfaction: Inspire and Encourage. Similar was that followers from both countries were more satisfied with leaders who provided an inspiring vision (ISV) and who recognized accomplishment (ETH). The difference was that US followers were more satisfied with leaders who also fostered innovation (CTP) and who empowered followers (EOA) while their Singaporean counterparts showed no evidence that they

especially valued these leadership practices. While there were some similarities, the differences between these two models provide support for the first hypothesis, that followers from the two countries have different expectations of leadership practices, indicating the impact of nationality.

**Table 1.** Regression Tests of Leadership Practices Predicting Satisfaction With Leader in Four Groups<sup>†</sup>

	<b>Model 1</b> <b>US Low Work</b> <b>Experience</b>	<b>Model 2</b> <b>Singapore Low</b> <b>Work Experience</b>	<b>Model 3</b> <b>US Moderate Work</b> <b>Experience</b>	<b>Model 4</b> <b>Singapore Moderate</b> <b>Work Experience</b>
Model the Way	-.07	.16	<b>.29*</b>	<b>.23*</b>
Inspire a Shared Vision	<b>.19*</b>	<b>.34*</b>	.06	.21
Challenge the Process	<b>.21*</b>	.01	.14	.17
Enable Others to Act	<b>.28*</b>	.12	<b>.35*</b>	<b>.18*</b>
Encourage the Heart	<b>.19*</b>	<b>.17*</b>	-.08	-.01
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.53 ( <i>F</i> =45.25)	.48 ( <i>F</i> =37.63)	.47 ( <i>F</i> =35.32)	.48 ( <i>F</i> =32.08)
N	232	235	234	199

<sup>†</sup> Dependent variable = Satisfaction with leader.

\*  $p < .05$

However, comparing all of the models provides support for the second hypothesis that follower expectations of leadership practices will converge as they gain work experience and subjected to globalization forces. With moderate levels of work experience (five-to-ten years), the same leadership practices predicted satisfaction with the leader for followers from both the US (Model 3) and Singapore (Model 4). Both groups expect their leaders to set an example (MTW) and to empower followers (EOA). Moreover, within-country comparisons (i.e., Model 1 versus Model 3 for the US, and Model 2 versus Model 4 for Singapore) show different predictors between those with low and moderate levels of work experience. The importance of leadership practices on satisfaction with their leader of the groups with more work experience, from both countries, is not the same as that of the low work experience groups. In sum, the followers with work experience were more like each other than they were like their less experienced country mates.

## DISCUSSION

The aim in this study was to test for evidence of convergence among leadership expectations caused by the globalization of business. In particular, we predicted that relatively inexperienced followers would hold expectations consistent with their national cultural values, and that these expectations would diminish in significance compared with globalization forces as reflected in their having increasing time spent in the workforce. These hypotheses were tested using four groups of followers which contrasted work experience (based on age: 18-23 years old versus 28-33 years old) and national origin (US versus Singapore), and they were generally supported. The less experienced followers had different expectations of their leaders from their more experienced counterparts, and those differences were consistent with the cultural values of their home nation. The two groups with more work experience did not have different expectations of their leaders, and were relatively similar in what leadership practices contributed the most to their satisfaction levels with their leaders. These findings extend an understanding of leadership in the global era, and have important implications.



From an *etic*, or universal, perspective, the findings suggest that leaders who Model the Way and who Enable Others to Act will have the most satisfied followers. That is, leaders who serve as an example and who empower others to take action will best meet the leadership expectations of their followers. In a related analysis, Zagorsek and colleagues (2004) also found that these two practices were the most highly rated among moderately work-experienced MBA students in the US, Nigeria, and Slovenia. While no doubt that all five leadership practices can contribute to follower performance (Kouzes and Posner, 2017, Posner, 2015), it may be that some leadership practices are more salient than other ones. The consonance between the findings in this study and those of Zagorsek et al. (2004) provide some evidence of an international convergence in which followers expect leaders to set an example and to empower their subordinates.

However, our findings also revealed some *emic*, or culture-specific, results. For those with little work experience, there were differences in the sources of leadership satisfaction between Singaporeans and US respondents. Although both groups expected leaders to Inspire a Shared Vision and to Encourage the Heart, the US followers also preferred their leaders to Challenge the Process and Enable Others to Act while the Singaporeans did not expect their leaders to be either particularly change-oriented or empowering. These differences are consistent with the general differences between US and Singaporean national culture, and suggest that nationality may have its greatest influence on those who have yet to enter the workforce. With workforce experience, the influences of multinational organizations and global business practices may create more citizens of the world than of any nationality or nation state.

Taken together, the findings tentatively suggest that while there may be an emerging global consensus about what leadership behaviors followers expect from leaders, it takes time for followers to adopt and assimilate those expectations. This perspective offers reconciliation between those studies claiming that culture powerfully influences leadership and those studies claiming that it does not. Both viewpoints may be correct, and to integrate them it is necessary to take into account the process and time-period in which globalization acts. Our data suggest that leaders may need to be most culturally adaptable when dealing with young or inexperienced followers. There appears to be relatively rapid convergence of expectations (i.e., approximately five years), but those formative years may represent an important leadership challenge.

However, this study carries three important caveats to take into consideration, while offering promising directions for future research. First, respondents' actual years of work experience was not measured, with age group (18-23 and 28-33) used as a proxy. This approach is a reasonable one, since most college-age people in both nations have relatively little work experience. Future studies should measure work experience more directly. Doing so would eliminate possible confounds, and allow for a more precise estimate of the speed at which expectations converge.

The second limitation is that we did not measure personal values, but instead used national norms. While this approach is typical of cross-cultural studies, it does have drawbacks because individual members of every culture vary in their personal values (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2011). The most individualistic people in Singapore are almost certainly less collectivistic than, for example, the most collectivistic Americans. As others have shown, individuals within a country can have quite different levels of belief in the prevailing norms (Zhang et al., 2013). It will be useful in future studies to include measures of individuals' personal values (e.g., the

extent to which each person endorses power distance or uncertainty avoidance), which will provide a more accurate representation of their beliefs and expectations.

The third limitation is that the data are from only two nations. We noted that the US and Singapore do provide a useful comparison and that the results appear to be consistent with those from other nations (Zagorsek et al., 2004). Nonetheless, we cannot assume that our findings are generally representative. In order to define the content of the global consensus about effective leadership, it will be necessary to sample more broadly across nationalities. It may be particularly useful to select countries that differ on the two value dimensions that were not relevant to this sample, to examine any additional effect they may have on follower expectations.

These results, in addition, raise an interesting question in finding that three of the five leadership practices were non-significant predictors of experienced followers' satisfaction with their leaders. One explanation is that the three non-significant leadership practices genuinely do not contribute to follower satisfaction; experienced followers may not expect these behaviors from leaders. An alternative explanation would be that the leadership practices are important to followers' satisfaction, just not in a monotonic fashion. Could there be a threshold level for those practices and increasing frequency has minimal impact? For example, leaders may need to engage in a moderate level of challenging the process and doing more does not improve follower responses. Fully understanding such possibilities requires further investigation.

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