Investigating the Relationship Between Confucianism and Leadership: A Comparative Study of University Faculty

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how due to the potential impact of cultural factors on leadership, further research of foreign contexts is needed. A study was designed to examine relationships between Confucian values and leadership preferences in a South Korean context. First, the Vannsimpco Leadership Survey (VLS) was given to faculty from both a South Korean and American university. Responses from each group were then averaged by leadership style and statistically compared using the Mann-Whitney U formula. Results revealed significantly higher Korean preferences for autocratic-transformational ($U = 365.50, p < .001$) autocratic-transactional ($U = 453.00, p < .001$), and transactional leadership ($U = 613.50, p < .05$). In contrast to Korean faculty, American respondents significantly preferred transformational leadership ($U = 601.00, p < .05$). Empirical analysis suggests that hybrid leadership styles are needed in South Korea to address complex interdependent Confucian values, which support both autocratic and democratic social layers.

KEYWORDS

Autocratic, Confucianism, Democratic, Korea, Leadership, Transactional, Transformational

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that both individualistic and group leadership strategies impact employee performance (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995). Although each leadership style has positive effects, they also have drawbacks which manifest when specific contextual triggers emerge. Within schools, detrimental national policies, poor educational resources, and negative teacher attitudes may each impact leadership. As Hadley (1997) explains, manifestation of these contextual factors is governed by an underlying cultural ethos. Societal values shape the policies that are developed on a national level, as well as the means by which they are interpreted and implemented in local contexts. Since culture has a ubiquitous influence on society, governing both group attitudes and behavior, it cannot be excluded from discussion of leadership effectiveness (House et al., 1999; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorman, & Gupta, 2004; House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002).

Although research of leadership styles has been conducted in diverse cultural contexts (Bambale, Shamsudin, & Subramanian, 2013; Koh et al., 1995; Zhou & Miao, 2014), it often examines the adaption of Anglocentric theory through a one-size-fits-all paradigm (Eacott & Asuga, 2014). Such study may yield general conclusions about the efficacy of a strategy, but ultimately impedes in-depth analysis of local cultural values and their impact.

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Due to the influence of various cultural mores, the efficacy of diverse leadership styles within foreign contexts is difficult to ascertain. More research is needed to examine the feasibility of various leadership styles in foreign contexts (Eacott & Asuga, 2014; Li, 2011). Instead of using an “as is” approach to the adoption of new leadership paradigms, both strengths and weaknesses must be analyzed in accordance with cultural factors. Such research may facilitate adaptation of leadership styles to unique cultural contexts.

THE IMPACT OF CONTEXT AND CULTURE ON LEADERSHIP

Weaknesses of each leadership style ultimately manifest when unique contextual variables arise. In Confucian settings such as China, Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong, resources and training for new leadership strategies are often not an issue (Wong, 1995), yet a centralized bureaucracy makes empowerment of subordinates problematic. Hierarchical power relationships prohibit followers from acting independently. In educational settings, teachers are reluctant to resolve issues without direct guidance from administrators (Sackney & Dibs, 1995; Wong, 1995), just as students are reluctant to act creatively without direct guidance from a teacher (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015).

While each country has specific characteristics affecting the efficacy of leadership (e.g., economic access to resources), culture ultimately dictates the influence of various leadership strategies on organizational performance. Confucian countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan, for example, are driven by a common cultural ethos supporting five virtues: Ren, Yi, Li, Chih, and Shin (Northouse, 2011; Park & Chesla, 2007). The complexity of these virtues makes adoption of traditional leadership paradigms problematic. While some virtues seem congruent with individual leadership styles, others do not.

Ren and Yi, which denote a sense of benevolence and righteousness, appear compatible with the transformational leadership style. Like Ren and Yi, transformational leadership transcends self-interest, compelling group dedication to organizational goals (Bass, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1995; Burns, 1978). It also has a positive impact on group members as a whole (Bolkab & Goodboy, 2009; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Tims, Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2011). First, it increases social identification and reduces conflict, thereby increasing the effectiveness of collaborative efforts (Huang, 2013; Zhang, Cao, & Tjosvold, 2011). Secondly, it increases creativity. A study by Shin and Zhou (2003), for example, found that, among the 290 Korean supervisors and employees surveyed, there was a positive correlation between transformational leadership and creativity. As pointed out by Gumusluoglu and Iles (2009), this creativity transcends individual boundaries, actually manifesting itself at the organizational level. Finally, transformational leadership has a positive impact on the ethical climate of a workplace. A survey of 764 teachers in Nigde, Turkey, for example, suggested that this leadership style cultivates caring and adherence to legal statutes or procedures (Sagnak, 2010).

While transformational leadership may be compatible with group values of Ren and Yi, it may not match Li, which delineates status differences (based on age, gender, social position). With leadership styles like transformational or servant leadership, expectations for individual roles and group behaviors are not clearly defined (Yukl, 1999), which may negatively impact the complex hierarchy mandated by Li. Unlike more egalitarian forms of leadership, transactional and autocratic leadership styles may be more congruent with the concept of Li. Transactional leadership, which motivates members to act through rewards and punishments, requires top-down control of resources (Bass, 1999; Washington, Sutton, & Sauser, 2014). Like transactional leadership, autocratic control of subordinates requires clear roles of authority like those designated through the Confucian virtue of Li.

Chih and Shin, which place importance on moral behavior and honesty, respectively, appear consistent with democratic leadership, which requires empowerment of organizational members that perform tasks independently and conscientiously (Park & Chesla, 2007). As with transformational leadership, this leadership style may bolster positive relationships among groups members, harmonizing with the virtues of Ren and Yi (Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas, 2000; Saedi et al.,
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