

The Effect of Locus of Control and Culture on Leader Preferences

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ABSTRACT

Leadership has a vital place in the field of management. Recent studies mostly focus on leadership from the point of view of leaders, and followers are generally ignored. However, leadership does not exist without followers. In this study, leadership preferences are examined through the perspectives of followers. Leadership preferences are considered to be linked with locus of control and culture. One hundred thirty-eight students from both Eastern and Western cultures participated from undergraduate English as a second language program at a university in Southern California. The results of this study have shown that leadership preferences of females leaned toward a democratic leadership style, while males prefer more autocratic leadership style. Second, there was a significant, although slight, difference between males and females on locus of control. Females reported having an internal locus of control while males reported an external locus of control. In this study, It is also found that people having higher socioeconomic status prefer an autocratic leadership style and people with internal locus of control tend to prefer a democratic leadership style. Finally, Eastern countries prefer democratic leadership style and they have higher internal motivation than Western countries.

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Introduction

Generally, it is observed that quantitative studies examining leadership from leaders' perspectives tend to answer questions such as, *what are the characteristics of a good leader, how does one become a leader, or what is leadership*. When we have a look at influential leaders throughout history, in terms of both their personal and behavioral features and their approaches to events, different leaders have been followed by different communities and societies. There are times that people follow autocratic leaders, and there are times that followers chose more democratic ones. For this reason, *trying to limit the definition of the leadership* is not seen enough, because truth can differ according to time, place and individuals.

In order to understand the leadership concept better, two points should be stated with importance. First, Truman defines the leader as a person who has the ability to make people do the work those others does not want or enjoy doing (Manske, 1999). Second, Cüceloğlu (1998) emphasized that leadership or management is a conditional rather than a deterministic situation in that a person can be leader as long as there are others to lead. Leader behavior is related to attitudes in the relationships with the group that they manage or are followed by. There are varieties of leadership attitudes that leaders can use in order to influence their subordinates. These attitudes generally can be listed as autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire (based on latitude) (Buluç, 2007)

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Items such as beliefs, ideas, history, religion, traditions, etc. affect national culture (Majeed et. al., 2010). The dominant Confucian values in Hong Kong have great effects on the organizations being more obedient, loyal and respectful towards their leaders. On the other hand, it is exactly the opposite in Western firms. In both the U.S.A and Australia, equality and participation are more common. In these countries, the authority was legitimized by performance and merit. This creates better decision- making, control, devolution of authority, and decentralization (Majeed et. al., 2010).

It is said that people in the U.S.A. and Western cultures have an independent individualism perception, whereas in Eastern and Southeastern cultures, people have mutual self-dependent individualism perception (Hofstede, 1983). Between the independent cultures and the mutual-dependent ones, there are many facts related to individualism that seem to change significantly. In Western cultures, for example, self-sublimation is a process that works everywhere and every time, but it is not very common in mutual-dependent cultures (Taylor2007:136). Intercultural studies show that collectivist cultures show more obedient behaviors than individualist cultures (Bond &Smith, 1996). It is also known that there is a consistency between the values that are learned in the process of growing up and observed from the mass media, as well as adulthood behaviors and preferences (Taylor2007:217). In a survey conducted by Hofstede, *power distance* and *uncertainty avoidance* appear to be two of the five factors affecting the usage of power and authority in different cultures (Hofstede, 1983). These two terms can be linked with the relationship between leaders and their followers.

Power distance refers to inequality in the distribution of power between individuals. In societies with high power distance, the gap between the most powerful and least powerful people is wide. As this gap is accepted by the society, the members become restless if this gap becomes narrower. For example, if a manager tries to decrease the gap by behaving in a manner that is closer and friendlier, subordinates will not accept this convergence (Fatehi, 1996: 279). On the other hand, in societies with low power distance, individuals believe in equality and try to reduce inequalities. In such a society, managers do not see themselves as different from their subordinates and they try to be friendlier to them (Çalışkan, 2008).

In cultures with high power distance, an ideal leader is strict and autocrat. Hofstede's research shows that in societies with high power distance, subordinates accept the authoritarian leadership style more easily. (Hofstede, 1983).

It can be inferred from the studies that the tendency toward democratic leadership in advanced Western societies is not a coincidence. The more properties and facilities, the less *power distance* and *uncertainty avoidance*. On the other hand, it can be surmised that high power distance causes unhealthy and broken relationships between leaders and their subordinates. In such societies, subordinates' expectations for a leader resemble the characteristics of an autocratic leader, such as their being strict, disciplined and serious, making their own decisions and executing these decisions.

According to Mills (2005), American leaders tend to use five different leadership styles: directive, participative, empowering, charismatic, and celebrity. In American businesses, political connections and family control are less important than in Asian businesses. While American businessmen see their managers like any other employee in the company, Asians link leaders with power. Also, the transmission of power from father to son and having the power in one hand is suitable with autocratic style.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the concept that when individuals in society feel themselves being threatened in uncertain and complex situations they try to reduce this uncertainty (Yan &Hunt, 2005:27). In societies with a high level of uncertainty avoidance, uncertain aspects of life are seen as threats to be fought continuously. Society members take fewer risks, worry about the future more, and do not trust the rules and regulations in order to avoid ambiguity (Çalışkan, 2008). In societies with a low level of uncertainty avoidance, ambiguity is seen as an extension of a normal life. Individuals are more comfortable taking risks and it is believed that, to some extent, conflicts and competitions are beneficial for society.

If one examines carefully, it can be seen that all theories about leadership hitherto have been developed in Western countries where *power distance* and *uncertainty avoidance* are low. Low power distance provides closer relationships between leaders and their followers. Therefore; it is not surprising that these countries emphasize the democratic-participative leadership style. In these countries, both superiors and subordinates

see the sharing of power as important. Subordinates participate in the decision-making process and do not hesitate to take risks; and superiors deal with the ambiguity which is resulted from the transmission of authority from top to bottom.

Followers give us clues about their loci of control in terms of their leadership choices while societies consisting of these individuals can differ about their development levels and cultures. Low levels of power distance can be associated with internal locus of control and high levels of power distance can be associated with external locus of control. This is because people with an external locus of control need external motivation in order to take action whereas people with an internal locus of control take action with intrinsic motivation. People with an external locus of control are afraid to take risks. As such, they do not accept responsibility and they link these outcomes with other people or events, not themselves. Characteristics of these kinds of people directly match those of autocratic leaders, whereas people with an internal locus of control are looking for a leadership perception in which they can actively participate in the decision-making process. This coincides with democratic leadership qualities.

In organizational literature, the concept of locus of control has generated much interest (Spector, 1982; Taken from Martinet al., 2005). Locus of control can be defined as (1) the power that controls employees' self-actions and the things that are done for them and (2) perception of people on who or what is responsible for the results of the behaviors or events in their lives (Demirtaş&Güneş, 2002). It can also be seen as *belief for self-control and external control* in the literature. In addition, the perception of locus of control can be defined as a general expectation related to the idea that reward and punishment can be controlled by the people themselves, or by some external factors (Rotter, 1966).

In order to increase the possibility of repetition of behavior, reinforcement may be necessary. However, this is not enough. People should also be able to establish a causal relationship between their behaviors and events following them. Therefore, some people develop a strong faith that valuable rewards can only be obtained by chance and they are not masters (determiners) of their own fates. In contrast, some have quite a permanent belief that they are responsible for what happens to them, good or bad. *If you look for, you find; if you seed, you harvest; if you work, you earn, etc.* Generally, it is said that the first group is defined with external locus of control and the second one is defined with internal locus of control (Dönmez, 1985).

The concept of locus of control was introduced by Rotter (1966) as a personal characteristic and it qualifies the generalized expectations or beliefs related to the cause-effect relationship between a person's behaviors and results of these behaviors. As a result of the behavior, either positive or negative, people who perceive it as a product of their own behavior are the ones who tend to have internal locus of control. When the same situation is perceived as a result of chance, fate, destiny or other powerful people choices etc., these people are regarded as having an external locus of control (Brandt, 1975; taken from Deryakulu, 2002).

People with internal locus of control and people with external locus of control have different types of relationships with their managers. Previous researchers show that people with an internal locus of control use more effective tactics compared to those with an external locus of control (Ringer & Boss, 2000; taken from Martin et al., 2005) and that they use more task-oriented coping strategies (Anderson, 1977; taken from Martin et al., 2005). Because people with an internal locus of control feel more control they are more likely to solve task-oriented problems. From this, we can infer that they would prefer the democratic leadership style when compared to people with an external locus of control.

Like our other characteristic features, our having an internal or external locus of control is a product of the interaction between the innate powers that we have at birth and the environment. When we hear the word *environment*, the first thing that comes to mind is the family environment that an individual grows up in. Parents who educate individuals, in fact, represent values and attitudes of their social class. Social class mentioned here is not only an economic concept, but also has an extensive meaning, including an individual's education level, habits, world views, incomes and life styles. Individuals in a particular socioeconomic class represent a part of a common value system, which includes child-rearing styles, which lead to development of different personality traits. In autocratic environments in which behaviors are kept under strict control and being loved is conditional, children grow up as timid, dependent, obedient and insecure. On the other hand, it was observed that children who grow up in a democratic environment

develop a strong sense of individualism and become independent, self-sufficient, and dominant, possess social interaction skills, are confident, and curious (Kuzgun, 1988).

According to the participants with an external locus of control, obeying the rules of the social environment in which they live is a task. They determine their behavior by thinking, "What do others say?" and they cannot resist the pressures of others. Mostly, they view their own happiness as being dependent on others (i.e. mother-father, an object, etc.) or trying to make these individuals happy.

According to Öztürk (1990) and Yavuzer (1994), people growing up with authoritarian parent attitudes obey others in order to cope with authority and cannot behave differently from their desired behavior. This situation is seen especially in environments where a severe penalty is applied and the only way to eradicate the punishment is by obeying. When they grow up, most of these individuals continue to yield to authority without question and relinquishing their power to authorities. Mostly, these individuals are in the external locus of control dimension. Because of this, they ignore their own necessities, cannot defend their own ideas and they cannot stick to their own decisions. Such individuals see themselves as a means of fulfilling the desires of other individuals and they think that they are no longer responsible for their own actions (Balat&Akman, 2004).

In this research, leadership traits are examined in terms of the followers. As is known, the first condition of being a leader is to have followers. Generally it is thought that followers determine the features that their leaders should have. Socioeconomic level and locus of control are determining factors in followers' leadership choices. It is thought that people coming from a low socioeconomic level are more obedient and have an external locus of control while people coming from a high socioeconomic level are more authoritarian and have an internal locus of control. Given this, the hypothesis of this research is that followers' expectations of a leader can differ according to their socioeconomic level and locus of control. This means that followers with low socioeconomic status and external locus of control desire autocratic leaders and followers with an internal locus of control to desire democratic leaders.

Results

One hundred thirty-eight students from an English as a second language program at a Southern California university participated in the study. The student body represented both Eastern (44) and Western (94) cultures. Countries represented in the study considered to be Eastern were Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan and Japan. Countries represented in the study considered to be Western were Europe and South America. Because it was private English as a second language program, no US residents participated in the participant pool. The age distribution of these students was between 18 and 35.

Looking at the socioeconomic distribution of the students, in general, older students were from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, regardless of the countries they represented ($r=.304$, $p<.01$). Students from the Eastern countries were generally older and had higher socioeconomic status ($r=.658$, $p<.01$) than those from Western countries.

The leadership preferences of females ($F=116$) leaned toward democratic leadership, while males ($M=113$) leaned toward autocratic leadership ($F=5.96$, $p=.016$).

Although the differences were very small, females had more of an internal locus of control ($M=34$) than males ($M=35.5$) ($F=11.89$, $p<.001$).

Leadership: There is a negative correlation between socioeconomic level and leadership preference ($r= -.182$, $p<.05$), where the higher the socioeconomic status, the more likely the participants were to prefer the autocratic leadership style. There is also a negative correlation between locus of control scores and leadership preference ($r= -.308$, $p<.05$). Participants with an internal locus of control tended to prefer the democratic leadership style. There was a positive correlation between leadership style preferences and hemispheric classification of the world (Eastern countries: 2, Western countries: 1) ($r=.350$, $p<.01$). Eastern countries prefer democratic leadership style.

Students from Eastern countries were more likely to be internally motivated than students from Western countries ($r= -.253$, $p<.01$).

Multiple regression analysis was used to predict leadership preferences by the following predictors: age, gender, socioeconomic background, locus of control, and hemispheric distribution of countries. Significant predictors were: socioeconomic background ($B = -.200$, $p = .016$), locus of control ($B = -.168$, $p = .053$) and hemispheric distribution (East vs. West) ($B = .281$, $p = .012$). The higher the socioeconomic status, the more likely they were to prefer an autocratic leadership style. Although these results are significant, the largest component of the predictor is a constant, meaning that they do not add much power to the prediction.

Limitations of this study include the restriction of range in most variables. The leadership style range was from 93-129 and they could all fall into the democratic preference. There are similar concerns with the socioeconomic backgrounds, the vast majority of participants falling between 28 and 36. The language program the students attended is expensive and most of them are paying out of pocket, which limited the low end of the socioeconomic strata to participate in the study.

Conclusion and Discussion

The concept of leadership has different meanings among cultures and genders. Some cultures would prefer autocratic leaders who are supposed to guide them about what to do while democratic leaders allow followers to have a voice in management and in the decision-making process.

When gender differences were examined in this study, it was found that females were more inclined to choose democratic leaders while males preferred autocratic leaders. From this, it can be inferred that women are more interested in being involved in the process of leadership than men. Females are more inquisitorial and skeptical while males are more obedient and submissive towards their leaders. This could explain why the most successful soldiers are males. Secondly, there is a slight but significant difference between the genders. Females had a higher internal locus of control than males. These results can be linked, such that people with an internal locus of control tend to choose democratic leaders more often than people with an external locus of control.

Other findings can be summarized such that people with a higher socioeconomic status preferred an autocratic leadership style. Moreover, it was found that people living in Eastern countries preferred a democratic leadership style and they had higher internal motivation than people in Western countries. As people from Western countries are generally used to higher standards of living provided by external factors, they tend to prefer autocratic leaders, whereas people from Eastern cultures are used to harsher lifestyles.

For further investigations, the issue of followers in the leadership concept should be emphasized more seriously and deeply, since leaders can only lead if they have followers. Looking at the coin from both sides can be more helpful to enlighten the relationship between leaders and their followers.

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