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Towards The Understanding Of Societal Cultures And Leadership In Non-western Countries: An Exploratory Study On Egypt

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INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasingly considerable growth of interest in societal culture and leadership in recent years even though there is no shortage of writing on either topic. Numerous papers and books have been written on what they mean and why they are important. These topics have been heavily researched because it is believed that tremendous benefits can be gained when leaders understand the reasons why certain practices and behaviors are successful. More importantly, tremendous benefits can be gained when leaders truly understand the differences in cultures across nations, and incorporate this understanding in current leadership styles.

Contemporary thinking has moved rather sharply away from the simple notion that a global measure of leader style could by itself account for any substantial amount of the variance in performance which varies from one country to the other. This research paper argues that in order to adequately understand a given leader behavior that behavior must be examined both in terms of general and specific structure context across cultures. Most researchers, such as Misumi (1985) and Misumi and Peterson (1985), argue that there is a certain underlying universal structure to the way a leader's behavior is interpreted, which is general in the nature of leader-subordinate relationships. While few researchers, such as Yukl (1998), argue the opposite. These few researchers justify their position by pointing out that most, if not all, of the research on leadership during the past half century was conducted in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe which does not present an accurate and true indication of leadership worldwide.

Furthermore, Hofstede (1993) states that in a global perspective, US management theories contain a number of idiosyncrasies not necessarily shared by management elsewhere. Cross cultural psychological, sociological, and anthropological research shows that many cultures do not share the same assumptions underlying leader behavior and style (Den Hartog et al. 1999). As a result there is a growing need for a better understanding of the way in which leadership is enacted in various cultures and a need for an empirically grounded theory to explain differential leader behavior and effectiveness across cultures.

WESTERN CONCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP IN COMPETITION WITH EMERGING LEADERSHIP PARADIGMS

At a fundamental level, literature on leadership has mainly been driven from and implicitly representing primarily North American cultural assumptions. Thus, the concept of leadership in its entirety is more than likely a western construct, which does not necessarily take into account other non western constructs. Furthermore, leader style's and theories developed in the western world assume that the rest of the world will abide by the same rules and concepts. The current study argues that this notion is flawed since different parts of the world have different concepts of leader style and behavior. A counter argument to the previous notion is that human beings are similar all over the world, and by the same

token, human behaviors ought to be similar in their leadership styles and concepts.

There is currently an emerging tendency to conduct research on cross cultural aspects of leadership. Much of that research has appeared to take the cross cultural validity of the existence of the concept of leadership and leader style for granted, and test the applicability of western forms of those concepts to foreign cultures and countries. This paper argues that much of the results and findings from such research are not very comprehensive since it does not take into account the variations of those concepts across the rest of the world. This should come as no surprise to us since most, if not all, of the research done on leadership has been published in western journals that have been primarily originated in and for North America. Very rarely does one hear that there is a sound reputable world wide recognized journal that has originated from other parts of the world. And even if there are such journals, one does not find researchers citing those studies that have been published in those journals as often as they do in North American journals. Most importantly, researchers do not even attempt to publish their work in such journals.

Based on the previous argument, one should take into account that the universal concept of leader style is not necessarily the one that has been developed in North America or the western world in general, but there could be other concepts of leader style in other parts of the world. In addition, one should keep in mind that there is no such thing as a universal concept of leader style. For example, let's assume that there is a concept of leader style developed in a country such as Egypt. Do you think that Egyptian leaders abide and believe in the concept of leader style that has been developed and widely accepted across Egyptians, or would Egyptian leaders abide and believe in the concept of leader style that has been developed in the western part of the world? In my opinion, and as an Egyptian citizen, I believe that Egyptian leaders abide and believe in the concept of leader style that has been developed and widely accepted across Egyptians, since they believe that their concept is the best one that fits the Egyptian culture.

In addition, I discourage any researcher about to embark on accepting the western conceptualizations of leader behavior as universal and widely accepted. Researchers should review the literature and conduct a pilot survey in order to assess which leadership theory or concept do countries abide by. For example, the French do not have a term equating to leadership in the French language (Whittington, 1993). So, the question becomes which leadership theory should a researcher abide by when conducting research about French leaders if they do not have a term equating to leadership in their language? The answer would be to consult the French researchers or managers and determine which concept they utilize in their research.

Cross cultural research on leadership has certainly challenged the normative models of leadership posed through the decades primarily by American theorists. Cultural values in different countries, such as the ones in Japan, suggest a very different form of leadership to that advocated within a western construct where values of individualism, a low acceptance of power distances between members, and an internalization of masculine values of assertiveness and challenge are the norm (Hofstede, 1994). Thus, leadership researchers should proceed with extreme caution when attempting to examine leadership concepts across cultures and nations. Those researchers should not fall into the trap of the misconceived notion that a universal agreed upon and widely accepted western theory of leadership exists.

DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

In order for researchers to better understand how to conduct leadership across culture's research, it is necessary to understand the dimensions of culture and be able to define culture in measurable terms. But, in order to understand the dimensions of culture, it needs to be defined first. According to Dimmock and Walker (2000), culture means the values, customs, traditions, and ways of living which distinguish one group of people from another. This definition aligns with that of Hofstede (1991), who defines culture as patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting underpinning the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. In Hofstede's definition of culture, the collective programming of the mind refers to the shared beliefs, values, practices of a group of people, whether that group be a society, nation state, or organizations.

In regard to the measurement of cultures, Hofstede (1991) advocates the development of cultural dimensions as ways of describing, measuring, and comparing cultures. Culture dimensions are defined as core axes around which significant sets of values, beliefs, and practices cluster (Dimmock and Walker, 2000). Furthermore, Hofstede took the position that culture dimensions are constructs that should not be reified. Hofstede further states that dimensions which aids in measuring culture do not exist. Those dimensions are merely tools for analysis which may or may not clarify a situation. In sum, neither Hofstede nor Dimmock and Walker provided a straight forward answer to the following question, "what are the culture dimensions that researchers should abide by when conducting their research on different cultures?"

Since the previous argument borders on some inconsistencies of those dimensions, therefore I argue that there is no one true dimension of culture. The logic behind my argument is that there could be one tool as a measure of culture which could adequately determine a dimension in a certain instance, and fail to determine the same dimension in a different context. These confusions regarding culture dimensions could easily lead to serious misconceptions among leadership researchers, and could hinder the findings that this study is attempting to provide.

LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

There is little research done on leadership across cultures in general, especially in the Middle East. I argue that research which focuses on values, practices, and effective leadership attributes that are widely shared in Middle Eastern societies is needed in order to have a better understanding on how Middle Easterners view leader style and behavior theories. Often national boundaries are utilized to approximate societal culture and leadership preconceptions. This is not usually adequate in order to effectively examine the various behaviors of leadership in that part of the world. The logical reason behind the previous statement is that cultures do in fact extend beyond national and geographic boundaries. For example, one could find that the northern part of Egypt differs from the southern part. By the same token, one could find that the southern part of Egypt to be very similar to the northern part of Sudan, although Sudan is not in the geographical boundaries Egypt. Nevertheless, the cultures in those regions are so much alike since they are very close to each other, and are affected by one another.

The findings of Kabasakal and Dastmalchian (2001) have important implications for both practicing managers in organizations dealing with cross national business and academics developing theories. Those findings have shown that there are major similarities in the societal and organizational culture in Middle Eastern countries in general. Some of the similarities that they found can be explained by the

common Islamic religion that the populations of these countries share. On the other hand, differences in languages, ethnic backgrounds, and economic and social institutions accounts for the differences in their cultures and implicit leadership theories as well. So, a religious aspect brings those countries together in some aspects, and languages and ethnic backgrounds differs them in other aspects from each other. These similarities and differences could in fact produce conflicting results and findings if they are not thoroughly studied and examined. Nevertheless, it has been shown in the study of Kabasakal and Dastmalchian (2001) that industry culture may in fact have a stronger influence on expected behaviors and norms of leaders which may override the influence of organizational cultures (Dastmalchian et al. 2000). While the societies in this part of the world have practices as individuals that do not engage in future oriented behaviors such as planning and investing in the future, organizations have more future oriented practices which contradict the norms of its own societies.

In line with organizational cultures, implicit leadership theories in non-western societies involve more performance and future orientation as well as other universalistic attributes such as charisma and supportive behavior. Organizational leaders are expected to be sensitive to local cultures and traditions yet at the same time become initiators of change. This combination could be quite challenging for leaders. Thus, training programs for managers in all types of organizations and academic theorists would increasingly need to involve a combination of universalistic dimensions with culture specific manifestations of these attributes and local traditions in mind, which is by no means an easy task to accomplish.

Regarding the leadership perceptions across cultures, it is believed that the way in which social environments in non-western cultures is interpreted is strongly influenced by the cultural background of the perceiver. The perceiver in academia is usually an academician from the western world. This implies that the attributes that are seen by the perceiver as characteristic for leaders will be inadequate, unless the perceiver consults with natives of the society or culture which he/she is attempting to analyze their leader's style and attributes. Values and ideologies will act as a determinant of culture specific super-ordinate prototypes, dependent on their strength (Hunt et al. 1990). So, in a country with strong and uniform cultures, super-ordinate prototypes will be widely shared, whereas in a country with a weak culture or even multiple sub-cultures, a wider variance among individual super-ordinate prototypes is expected (Hunt et al. 1990).

CONCEPTIONS OF CULTURE DIMENSIONS ACROSS NON-WESTERN SOCIETIES

Peters and Waterman (1982) argued that Middle Eastern cultures are considered to be strong and coherent because they are infused with a system of values, beliefs, and ideals that are well understood and adhered to by all members. These values and beliefs are reinforced by rituals and a rich mythology about past events in the history of their culture. The members of such cultures take extreme pride in their heritage and previous accomplishments. Logically, in order to develop adequate leader style and behavior theories for this part of the world, then these aspects should tie closely and be incorporated with those theories. Furthermore, Den Hartog et al. (19990) have found several attributes of leader style to be culturally contingent. So, in some countries those leader style or behavior are seen as contributing to outstanding leadership, whereas in other countries that same style or behavior is seen to impede such leadership. In short, leader attributes can be universally endorsed as positive, universally seen as negative, or be culturally contingent.

Hofstede's dimensions of culture are uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity, individualism-collectivism, and future orientation. According to Hofstede's dimension of individualism versus collectivism, Egypt would idealistically categorize as a collectivist society while North America would categorize as an individualistic one. In a collectivist society, leaders tend to work in groups, and have a higher ordinal goal that they are working towards, while in an individualist society, leaders tend to work alone, and have a specific tangible material goal that they are working towards. Furthermore, according to Hofstede's dimension of masculinity versus femininity, Egypt and North America categorize as a masculine society. Thus, the two cultures of Egypt and North America are different in some aspects and similar in others. The similarity in some dimensions of culture and differences in others could result in mixed and confusing results. One has to clearly differentiate among the similar and differing dimensions of two or more cultures under study.

A GLANCE AT LEADER STYLE AND BEHAVIOR IN EGYPT

Egyptians have traditionally viewed men as leading, independent, aggressive, and dominant, while women as passive, dependent, gentle, and responsible for household tasks (Baron, 1994). Existing research conducted on Egypt shows that throughout Egypt's history, women in particular, simply because of their gender, were discriminated against and constrained to roles such as care givers, child bearers, and nurturers in their families. At the same time, men assumed the role of bread winners and were responsible for providing food, shelter, clothing, and the rest of life necessities for the women and women in return took care of the children and household activities. As far as economic activities not based on the family unit was concerned; the norms and customs were that Egyptian women could only work as wage workers in agriculture and industry when their families were in need of their financial assistance (Tucker, 1985). Women have started to enter the labor force in large numbers over the past few decades; however Egypt still has one of the lowest wage labor participation rates for women in the world (Baron, 1994). Only recently, in the past few decades, Egyptian women have seen an increase in their participation in salaried labor force and were empowered, to a certain extent, in their jobs to reach managerial positions in rare instances (Shami et al., 1990). Hence, at least hypothetically, both Egyptian men and women are expected to sex stereotype managerial positions against women based on the type of jobs women held in the past such as clerical, secretarial, tourist guides, waitresses, etc.

I add one more crucial and vital dimension that Hofstede did not include in his dimensions of culture. This additional dimension would be religion. In Egypt, religion plays a major role in people's day to day lives, while this is not usually the case in North America. Thus, it could be assumed that religion guides the behaviors of leaders to a great extent in order to be viewed as honorable leaders by the society. North American leaders do not face this social pressure from their society as long as they are abiding by the laws. In Egypt, the laws are not based on the Islamic religion; they are extended from the French laws and the French laws are not based on any specific religion. Egyptian laws are based on the French ones due to the French occupancy of Egypt for a long period of time. Egyptian leaders could abide by the laws and not be viewed as honorable leaders since they are not abiding by the Islamic religion, while North American leaders could abide by the laws and be viewed as honorable leaders since the society does not exercise extra religious pressures on them.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON GLOBE

The initial aim of the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) research project was to develop societal and organizational measures of culture and leadership attributes that

are appropriate to use across cultures. GLOBE is a multi-phase, multi-method project initiated by Robert House in 1993. Over 170 social scientists and management scholars from 62 countries in all major regions throughout the world have engaged in the study of the relationship between culture and leadership. Egypt, which is the focus of this study, is one of the 62 countries that are included in the GLOBE research project.

GLOBE was designed to investigate the existence of universally acceptable and universally unacceptable leadership attributes, and to identify those attributes that are culture specific. The theoretical base of this research program is grounded in the notion of implicit theory of leadership which argues that individuals have implicit theories about the attributes and behaviors that distinguish leaders from others, and effective leaders from ineffective ones (House et al. 1999).

The GLOBE team reached consensus on the definition of the two central concepts: societal culture and leadership. They defined leadership as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members" (House et al., 1999, p.10). Societal culture was defined as "the commonality among members of collectives with respect to the psychological attributes … and the commonality of observed and reported practices of entities such as families, schools, work organizations, economic and legal systems, and political institutions" (House et al., 1999).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper were collected as part of the GLOBE research project. A detailed account of this project is provided in House et al.'s recent article (1999). The GLOBE dataset is available upon request from the University of Calgary. The theoretical base of this research program is grounded in the notion of implicit theory of leadership which argues that individuals have implicit theories about the attributes and behaviors that distinguish leaders from others, effective leaders from ineffective leaders, and moral from evil leaders (House, Ruiz-Quintanilla, Dorfman, Javidan, Dickson, & Gupta, 1999).

SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

As part of GLOBE, 142 Egyptian middle managers in three industries participated in this study. Those three industries were banking (29%), telecommunications (33%), and food processing (38%). The reason for the selection of these particular industries is the consensus among GLOBE researchers that all of those three industries exist in all of the 62 participating countries. The reason for the selection of middle managers is because of accessibility and willingness to participate in this study compared to top level executives. All the questionnaires were translated into Arabic, which is the native language of Egypt in order to avoid any confusion in the data provided by the respondents, and then translated back into English. The decentring method, first suggested by Werner & Campbell (1970), which is based on the back-translation procedure that is commonly used in cross-cultural research (Brislin, 1976) was used to translate the questionnaires from the English language to the Arabic language. The instruments were originally in the English language and a fluently bilingual native Egyptian graduate student translated the questionnaires into the Arabic language. A second fluently bilingual native Egyptian graduate student blindly translated the questionnaires back into the original language, English. The two original English language questionnaires were compared and examined for differences and a judgment call was made regarding the quality of the translation showing that almost no differences existed between the two original English language questionnaires and thus no adjustments were

necessary.

The respondents were from 19 organizations, occupying middle level positions. The average age of the respondents was 37.6, with an average of 13.7 years of work experience, and an average of 9.3 years in the same organization. 97 per cent of those who responded to the education level question had a university degree. The average size of the organizations represented was 1,864 employees. The data collection process was completed during 2003 to 2005.

RESULTS

GLOBE measured societal culture using nine cultural attributes. They are uncertainty avoidance, power distance, societal collectivism, in-group collectivism, gender egalitarianism, assertiveness, future orientation, humane orientation, and performance orientation. The results of the societal culture for the sample are shown in Table 1. As shown in the table, for all the cultural dimensions except for the power distance and in-group collectivism, the "should be" scores are higher than the "as is" scores. That is, the respondents feel that, on average, the societal culture in Egypt should change in that more uncertainty avoidance, more gender egalitarianism, higher levels of societal collectivism, more humane orientation, more performance orientation, more future orientation and assertiveness should be the norm in the society. Power distance on the other hand is perceived to be high and the perception of the individuals surveyed is that the emphasis on this aspect of culture should be reduced. In-group collectivism is another cultural dimension that according to the data should be less emphasized.

Table 1 also shows the range of scores for "should be" and "as is" scales for the entire GLOBE sample of 62 countries. Comparing the "should be" and "as is" scores of the Egypt data with the GLOBE data, it is evident that the Egyptian sample scores fairly high for power distance and in-group collectivism. In fact in terms of in-group collectivism, Egypt's mean score for the "as is" scale was 6.03 as compared with the overall GLOBE range of 6.52 – 4.06. Egypt in fact has the third highest score on this dimension (after the Philippines and Georgia). A prominent feature of the Egyptian societal culture is the extent to which they demonstrate loyalty, express pride and cohesiveness towards family, organizations, and other in-group collectivities. This is a sharp contrast to the picture that emerges when we considered societal collectivism. Egypt scored comparatively quite low on this dimension with a mean score for "as is" societal collectivism of 3.88. The overall GLOBE range for societal collectivism was 5.22 – 3.25 (Egypt in fact was the 13th lowest country in terms of ranking on this dimension). Therefore, the results show that Egypt has one of the lowest scores on societal collectivism while it shows one of the highest scores on in-group collectivism.

On power distance, it is apparent from Table 1 that Egypt scores high on this dimension (Egypt's score of 5.43 compared with the maximum of 5.8). That is, according to the respondents the present societal norm reflects an unequal sharing of power in the society. The "should be" score on this dimension of culture is equally quite revealing, in that the desire of the society to alter this aspect of the culture is by far the greatest among all the dimensions of culture under study (the absolute difference between the "as is" and the "should be" scores is highest for power distance, and lowest for in-group collectivity). The results also show that Egypt scored in the lower range in the GLOBE sample of assertiveness "as is" (Egypt's mean score was 4.04, which was the 24th country from lowest in the GLOBE list). That is, Egyptians are less confrontational and aggressive in social relationships.

Among the other more interesting observations regarding societal culture was the finding that gender egalitarianism is not highly emphasized (in a comparative sense, allowing for the fact that this dimension has fewer items than the GLOBE measure, Egypt's score on gender egalitarianism is 8th lowest score among the 62 countries). That is, the norm in the society is to maximize, or at least not minimize gender role differences and gender discrimination. Another noteworthy observation is that there does not appear to be a strong desire in the society to change this (the absolute difference between "as is" and "should be" scores if 0.76 – the second lowest among the nine dimensions). Humane orientation, on the other hand, is a strong societal cultural norm in Egypt in that being friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others is highly emphasized and rewarded (Egypt's score is 4.23 which is in the top 30% of the ranking of the 62 countries). The results reported in Table 1 also show that the societal norms in Egypt support performance orientation, improvement, and excellence (Egypt's score on performance orientation "as is" was 4.58, while the maximum score for all the countries was 4.94, ranking Egypt 8th). Future orientation as a cultural value receives relatively low emphasis in Egypt (score of 3.7 for "as is" ranking Egypt 20th from the lowest in the GLOBE sample) indicating that planning, investing, and future oriented behaviors are not highly emphasized. However, comparing the difference between "as is" and "should be" scores from Table 1 indicated that this dimension received the second highest absolute value. That is, the desire to make future orientation a societal norm is very high according to the respondents. Similarly, uncertainty avoidance as a cultural value is not highly emphasized (Egypt scored 3.67, 8th lowest score amongst the 62 GLOBE countries). However, there appears to be a desire to change that (as reflected in the "should be" score and the absolute difference between "as is" and "should be" scores).

In summary, the data reported in this study show that the societal culture in Egypt is characterized by a strong cultural value on in-group collectivism, low uncertainty avoidance, high performance orientation, high power distance, and low societal collectivism. A moderate emphasis on humane orientation and moderately low assertiveness and future orientation are also among the cultural attributes of Egyptian society.

DISCUSSION

The current research is an exploratory one because it took the first vital step to study a non-western culture, specifically a Middle Eastern one, namely Egypt. The initial findings of this study are considered to be a small step toward the right direction in terms of exploring the true meaning of leader style and behavior universally. This study contributes to our understanding of the western conceptions of leadership in competition with emerging leadership paradigms in non-western societies by examining societal culture of Egypt with the aid of GLOBE research project. To my knowledge, there is no other published work that has addressed the same issues that this study is addressing with a focus on Egypt. The conceptual and methodological aspects of the study have been guided by the GLOBE research project. The purpose of this study was to examine the societal culture in Egypt in relation with leadership attributes. This paper also reported and elaborated on the dimensions of Egypt's culture using GLOBE categories. When I examined the societal culture using the nine GLOBE dimensions, Egypt appeared to have the lowest score on assertiveness among all the 62 countries, and had relatively lower scores on uncertainty avoidance, societal collectivism, future orientation, and gender egalitarianism. On the other hand, Egypt had the third highest score on in-group collectivism, and had relatively high scores on performance orientation, power distance, and humane orientation. In terms of

the desires to change the culture, the data showed that Egyptians are most interested in reducing the power distance and increasing the future orientation aspects of the societal culture.

Leaders of the future need to be able to recognize the limitations that could hinder their performance if they strictly follow the leader style and behavior theories that are available in the current literature. As was discussed earlier, the current literature is mainly applicable on western cultures and is not considered to be qualified as universal theories that are widely accepted throughout the world. The research stream of leadership across cultures is mainly derived to satisfy the need that the leaders of the future have in mind. Future research should extend this study and develop a profile of effective leadership in Egypt.

TABLE 1

Societal Culture Dimensions

	Egyptian Data				Overall GLOBE Data			
	As Is		Should Be		As Is		Should Be	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Highest Score	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Lowest Score
1. Uncertainty Avoidance	3.67	.98	5.36	.76	5.37	2.88	5.61	3.16
2. Gender Egalitarianism	2.99	1.02	3.75	.56	4.08	2.50	5.17	3.18
3. Societal Collectivism	3.88	.93	5.54	.72	5.22	3.25	5.62	3.83
4. In-group Collectivism	6.03	.57	5.86	.76	6.36	3.18	6.52	4.06
5. Humane Orientation	4.23	.98	5.61	.72	5.23	3.18	6.09	3.39
6. Power Distance	5.43	.93	2.8	.8	5.8	3.25	4.35	2.04

7. Performance 4.58 .86 6.08 .6 4.94 3.2 6.58 2.35

Orientation

8. Future 3.7 .92 5.84 .63 5.07 2.88 6.2 2.95

Orientation

9. Assertiveness 4.04 .73 4.99 .65 4.8 3.36 5.56 2.66

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