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Business faculty perceptions of authentic leaders: a cross-cultural exploratory study

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This study explores the concept of “Authentic Leadership” from the perspective of Italian and American business school faculty. A convenience sample is utilized and it is exploratory in nature. While there is significant overlap between the cross-cultural respondents concerning the traits of authentic leaders, personal contact and experience has led the two groups to identify different examples of those who exemplify the concept. Additionally, there were differences in the type of advice the two samples would offer to those who aspire to become an authentic leader.

Globally, business schools and business school faculty view it as their responsibility to integrate this concept into their teaching and classroom discussions. However, people of diverse cultures may view the construct of authentic leader differently. Consequently, an examination of what business school faculty members believe constitutes an authentic leader generally, and specifically whether those from different cultures view authentic leaders differently is warranted.

Keywords: authentic leader, traits, faculty, cross-cultural, exploratory, Italy

Introduction

Business schools play a crucial role as “incubator” and “provider” of competencies needed by their graduates for employability (Guistiniano and Brunetta, 2015). Leadership and how they are perceived is becoming a major area of interest. It is even taking precedence over some of the skills traditionally considered success factors by Jack Welch (2013). This emphasis on leadership and the ability of the leader to be “authentic” is gaining importance and becoming a major part of business faculty’s understanding. This is particularly true if the needed competencies for leaders are developed.

A recent exploratory study found that authentic leaders were viewed by prospective business leaders (graduate MBA students) as having the ability to behave in a way that was based on who they were as a person in all relationships. This ability to “be oneself” was a quality that existed regardless of gender (Luthy & Byrd, 2014).

Background

The idea of authentic leadership has been largely debated by historians, philosophers and sociologists for several decades (Novicevic et al., 2006). While the idea of something “authentic,” spontaneous, or innate can be linked to the “technical rationality” introduced by Max Weber (1891), more recent studies in the field of management have tried to derive it from the efficacy of someone’s actions (Goffee and Jones, 2006).

The idea of authenticity as a construct making for a more effective leader is derived from the idea that it represents a way of opposing unethical behavior. There has been support that authentic leaders positively influence employees’ attitudes and behaviors. This assumes that the leader who behaves authentically creates conditions that improve the performance of those working in the organization (Khan, 2010).

Given the increased attention to moral dilemmas in business, and particularly for those leading organizations, validates the need to study authentic leadership and the social pressures that impact leaders (Cranton and Carusetta, 2004). Considering the moral implications of leadership is not a new phenomenon. In the late 1950s the business leader Chester Barnard integrated the idea of effective leadership with the need for moral excellence (Barnard, 1958). Barnard’s work in the area of executive leadership separates the personal from organizational responsibility but emphasizes the importance of both for the leader. Recent research agrees that it is necessary for leaders to take action as a result of conflicts due to issues that involve personal responsibility (Kernis, 2003).

The actions of leaders that must be taken as a result of conflicts due to issues of personal responsibility can be a challenge to the leader’s authenticity. This is especially true if authenticity is viewed as being true to oneself. There is no question that leaders find themselves in situations where organizational values conflict with the personal values of those in leadership positions (Ryan and Brown, 2003). These decisions are not just based on conscious decisions grounded in rational thinking, but can be influenced by the confidence of the leader (Kashdan, 2002). These situations add complexity for the leader and demands that they reflect on the meaning and application of authenticity.

Developing a framework of authenticity

While the works of Cranton and Carusetta (2004) and Barnard (1958) emphasize the moral dilemmas of leadership it must be pointed out that authenticity can be viewed from a variety of perspectives (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). When viewed through the lens of morality for example, authenticity can be seen as being true to oneself and rising above the

expectations of others (Pianalato, 2003). If, however the framework employed is ethical choice, emphasis is placed on the difference between the real and ideal self as mind and soul (Danzinger, 1997).

Separate from this is to view authenticity from a psychological perspective. Part of being authentic is for the leader to reflect on personal motives and unbiased perceptions of self, and the ability to reflect on behavioral and relational choices (Kernis, 2003). This requires psychological freedom so the leader is able to regulate behaviors in accord with individual needs for competence, self –determination, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1995). This is closely related to the idea of “being oneself” and acting in accord with one’s personal inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2002).

There have been different views of authenticity and how it relates to leadership versus its’ psychological meaning (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). At present, developmental views are stressed (Gardner et al., 2005). This developmental view is consistent with the thinking of positive psychology which stresses the value of the leader’s ability to influence the culture and employees (May, Chan, Hodges, and Avolio, 2003). To say it with Gardner et al. (2005), authentic leadership relates to the fostering of “veritable, sustainable follower performance” (p. 346).

Study methodology

The general aim of the present study is to compare and contrast authentic leadership between two cultures, one European and one North American or more specifically, one Italian and one United States. Despite being based on a convenience sample, the study exploits the rising interest that leadership and the other so called “soft skills” are generating in the business community, and consequently in business schools (Giustiniano and Brunetta, 2015).

Study survey

A one-page, two-sided pencil and paper survey was administered to a convenience sample of faculty enrolled in one Italian and one American business school. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the list of questions was kept to a minimum. Aside from classification questions, the instrument asked respondents: (1) whether authentic leaders were more prevalent, less prevalent today, or about the same as in the past?, (2) how they would define an authentic leader, (3) what traits they believed an authentic leader should possess, (4) asked to name four people they considered were authentic leaders and how others might know them, (5) why they answered the way they did, and (6) what advice they would give to someone who wanted to become an authentic leader?

Respondents

Respondents returned 41 surveys that contained at least some usable responses. The bulk of the responses were by Italian academics (n=28) with about half as many American (n=13). On the gender dimension, the response rates between the two country’s academics were virtually identical with approximately 28% female and 72% male. In terms of age the Italian faculty ranged from mid 20s to mid 60s, where their American counterparts skewed older with the range being mid 30s to mid 70s. This age difference translated into the American faculty holding more senior roles as Full Professors which the Italian respondents included post-doctoral and instructor positions. The relative distribution of respondents into the different areas of the two business schools were similar, taking into account the fact that

accounting is labeled as “managerial economics” in the Italian university system. Of those who responded, faculty in the management areas were the most dominant in number.

Results – prevalence of authentic leaders

When the perspectives of respondents were examined, the percentage of those two groups who believe authentic leaders are as prevalent today as in past times is almost the same, in the range of 30%. The difference about the idea that authentic leaders are “less prevalent today” than in the past is significantly higher in the USA than in Italy (67% vs. 48%). This evidence is quite counterintuitive considering the stronger legacy of Italy to its historical past. One possible explanation could be related to the delay in terms of the digital divide Italy suffers against the USA: the access to global information (e.g. satellite TV, Internet, smart mobile devices) could make foreign contemporary figures more “visible” and “accessible” than in the past. A confirmation of this point is that the “most authentic leader” mentioned by the Italian faculty is President Barack Obama. In fact, in late 2008 the diffusion of the Internet in Italy passed the critical threshold of 30% of the population (IoT, 2015). Singularly, President Obama does not appear in the US set of significant characters.

Results – traits of authentic leaders

Exhibit 1 reports all the traits mentioned by at least three faculty. The ones highlighted in bold have been mentioned by both American and Italian respondents. The connecting lines help visualize the patterns that the two sets of respondents related to the traits.

The range of the probability distributions are quite similar, so the traits themselves can be compared and acquire significance even if listed in a diverse rank. In particular, the most consistent element of authentic leadership appear to be “empathy”, being placed in similar positions in both the lists. Having a “vision” is also important, probably because it is seen as source of inspiration and a stable point of reference by the others. Finally, having the capability to “listen” emphasizes the relational dimension of leadership (Festré and Giustiniano, 2011).

Exhibit 2 presents the remaining traits identified by the respondents in connection to authentic leadership. The qualitative analysis of some overlaps shows some other interesting evidence on common or similar traits. The first group of common traits relies on “integrity”, “calm”, “positive” and the sense of “ethics”. The second is about the long-term orientation (Mission or goal driven). The third is about openness (to change, to experience, to the others). The fourth is about the leader’s positive self-perception (displayed through many facets: awareness, control, confidence). Finally, a general sense of purpose that generates the ability to lead by example, being humble and modest and ready to sacrifice.

As for the differences, the Italian respondents tend to consider the “innovativeness” of an authentic leader, who is asked to be “disruptive” and “creative”. This evidence is consistent with Steve Jobs ranking as second amongst the “authentic” leaders (see later – Exhibit 8). The American faculty privileged, instead, the managerial and organizational traits, expressed both in terms of decision making and team building.

Results – examples of authentic leaders

The articulation of the traits of authentic leadership was followed by the identification of real-life examples of authentic leaders (either living or historical figures). Exhibit 3 presents a compilation of the persons identified by at least by two respondents. Both for the

American and the Italian faculty all the cited leaders are men, with the only exception of Mother Theresa.

The fields to which these persons are affiliated are reported in Exhibit 4. Noteworthy is the fact that politics, humanitarian activity and business are the three fields in which authentic leaders operate. On the differences, Exhibit 9 shows how historical figures are considered referral points for the Italians while the Americans find leaders also in art/entertainment.

Discussion

The results presented can be discussed from a national cultures perspective. The Six Dimensions Model (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010) compares 76 countries and measures items on a 0-10 scale. In Exhibit 10, Italy and the U.S. are compared on the six dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Pragmatism, and Indulgence. From this comparison “Authentic Leader” traits can be viewed through the lens of culture. The impact of culture from this perspective can be considered as “a collective programming of the mind” and in this context culture can distinguish any group of people, at any level of aggregation, including nations (Hofstede, 1980).

Power Distance

In the power distance category, Italians tend to prefer equality and a decentralized power in comparison to their U.S. counterparts. The results tend to match with the authentic leader traits when comparing the differences between Italian and American faculty (see exhibit 5). In fact, decision making and organizational and managerial skills are more appreciated by the American respondents, while Italians then to focus more on trustworthiness.

Individualism

In the individualism category, the differences between Italian and U.S. cultures is significantly larger. Since Individualism is considered high for both (Italy=76; USA=91) it seems that the individual agenda is more dominant than the idea of society. Here some differences between Italy and the U.S. can be derived from the “authentic leaders” listed. The U.S. respondents saw three Presidents (Lincol, Kennedy and Reagan) as authentic leaders, while the Italian faculty mentioned only two prime ministers (Matteo Renzi and Silvio Berlusconi) but considered also other political figures (Kennedy, Putin, Castro). Such evidence has to be read in combination of the “centrality” of charisma identified as trait for “Authentic Leadership” by the Italian respondents. In the lens of “individualism”, that could reveal a different conception of the society/nation/public thing, meant as a set of complementary institutions (to the individuals). Specifically, while Americans identify political figures who dealt with very critical phases of the American economic and political scene, Italians appear to be more tolerant towards negative social behavior. In fact, for at least one of the mentioned characters the actual personal behavior is far from the positive idea of being good civil servants or even fair citizens. In this view, the Italian idea of leadership embeds a trait of charisma meant as in Ancient Greek as a “gift from the Gods” (no matter what kind of human behavior generates).

Masculinity

The construct masculinity which is considered the iconic place for the “self-made man,” shows Italian society very high (70), even higher than the U.S. (62). Gandhi and Kennedy are present in both the lists as they represent in different but interlaced fields iconic figures having strong visions and magnitudes. This could also explain to some degree the popularity (and implied authentic leadership) of Steve Jobs in Italy, based on the perception of the one who never quits regardless of personal, business and health adversity. Same reasoning might apply for Mandela and Martin Luther King.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty Avoidance is high in Italy(75) and low in the U.S. That evidence matches with appreciation of the U.S. respondents with decision making and the organizational skills. The leader forges his destiny and the one of the ones around him.

The Italian socio-economic system adds another element of interpretation. According to the Doing Business Report of the World Bank Group Italy ranks at the 56th position in 2015 (-4 from 2014: 52nd) while the U.S. is places at the 7th (WBG, 2015). So formality and bureaucracy spread throughout the Italian national system and society. Hence politicians (e.g. Matteo Renzi and Silvio Berlusconi) and managers (e.g. Sergio Marchionne) trying to change (or to foul) the system are seen as authentic leaders.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is high in Italian culture (61) and low in the U.S. (26). This attribute describes how societies maintain links with the past while dealing with the present and future challenges. That explains the lack of reference points in the historical figures for the U.S. respondents.

The roots of Italian pragmatism evolved from a distinct period of Italian history: the Renaissance (Giustiniano, 2013). The Italian Renaissance was the earliest manifestation of the wider European Renaissance. This was a time of great cultural change. Great achievements began in Italy during the 14th century. The period lasted for two centuries marking a sharp transition from medieval and early modern Europe. Great historical figures including Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, Michelangelo, and Raphael are some of the masterminds that revolutionized their fields of interest during this time period. Collectively, they created one of the cognitive pillars of the Italian mindset: the ability to combine “thinking out of the box” and tinkering (struggling with minor things by command of princes, popes, and others) (Giustiniano, 2013). The idea of combining “thinking” and “tinkering” as a way of interpreting organizational dynamics is not totally new (Ciborra, 1992). Exhibits 1 and 2 contain some useful responses for detecting the link between pragmatism, leadership, and the “thinking-tinkering” legacy to the Italian Renaissance. Considering Exhibit 2, for the “Thinking-Out-of-the-Box” a leader is seen as “Innovative”, “Intelligent”, “Creative”, “Disruptive”, while for the “tinkering” side is seen as “Pragmatist”, “Reliable” and with a “Technical background”.

Indulgence

In this category, the Italian score is low (30) while the U.S. one is high (68). In the Italian case this indicates restraint, while U.S. seems to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. One link to leadership

from the list of “Authentic Leaders” in Exhibit 3 is the presence of Pope Francis. In fact, Pope Francis is noted for his indulgent positions toward many established social constructs of the Church (Bergoglio & Skoraka, 2013). A restrained life style could also be a way to leadership with the names of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa.

Leadership, leaders and cultural differences

Linking the Six-Dimensional Model to the perceptions of Italian and U.S. faculty provides a way to differentiate them. It also provides a way to recognize differences among different cultures. This helps understand how culture impacts the perceptions of how leaders are viewed. The perception of “Authentic Leaders” is also affected by culture.

Cultural diversity has been studied around the world, showing how cultural patterns vary. In the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project, Robert House explored nine cultural dimensions of leadership and organizational processes. Data was collected from 18,000 managers from around the world. Exhibit 11 illustrates the countries ranking the highest and lowest on the GLOBE cultural dimensions. For purpose of the data in this study, we will consider only the areas where Italy is listed as part of the Lowest/Highest category. This consist of Institutional Collectivism, Future Orientation, and Performance Orientation.

In the Performance Orientation Dimension, where countries are ranked highest and lowest, the United States ranks the highest and Italy the lowest. This measures the extent to which the country encourages and rewards performance, and reflects values associated with how much individuals should be rewarded for improvements. Consistently with our evidence which shows a more visible long-term and result orientation for the U.S. respondents. In other categories such as Future Orientation and Institutional Collectivism, Italy is among the lowest. Future Orientation is a measure of the extent the country encourages investment in the future. This reflects planning and saving, and influences values associated with delaying gratification. Institutional Collectivism is measured by the degree which individuals are encouraged and rewarded for loyalty to the group as opposed to the individual. Since the United States is neither the lowest or the highest in Future Orientation or Institutional Collectivism, they are not listed. Still, they are not the lowest while Italy is. Comparing these differences in the context of being aware of cultural tendencies for the purpose of understanding competitive advantages, insights can be gained for any understanding of the impact of cultural influences on the individual.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of an exploratory study is to do just that – begin the examination of an issue or set of questions pertaining to a specific concept. Although responses were gathered from a convenience sample, there is sufficient evidence to state some valid, but tentative, conclusions as well as point a path forward for further study beyond the exploratory. Some high profile recent events in the field of business have given rise to a not insignificant distinction in the term, leader. Authenticity, as a positive trait, when added to the traditional label of leader, is seen as a distinct and preferable concept – one worthy of investigation. While the results reported here show that there are indeed some distinct differences between Italian and U.S. respondents in terms of who and what these authentic leaders are, there is still some areas of agreement, mostly related to empathy, integrity and vision. The differential traits are mostly related to deeper cultural differences. Further work with both a larger sample and one that delves more deeply into the sources of respondents’ evaluations and reasoning – particularly across other countries in Europe and

beyond, as well as how to transmit those traits to others in order to develop as an authentic leader, are the next logical steps.

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Exhibit 1
AUTHENTIC LEADER TRAITS
(MENTIONED BY AT LEAST 3 FACULTY)

<u>Italian Business Faculty</u>		<u>American Business Faculty</u>	
29%	Charismatic	28%	Honest
29%	Vision/Visionary	22%	Empathetic
21%	Communicator	22%	Ethical
18%	Decisive	22%	Knowledgeable
18%	Empathetic	17%	Compassionate
14%	Accountable	17%	Listener
14%	Available	17%	Vision/Visionary
14%	Confident		
14%	Exemplary		
14%	Influential		
14%	Open-Minded		
14%	Trustworthy		
11%	Competent		
11%	Determined		
11%	Energetic		
11%	Enthusiastic		
11%	Inspirational		
11%	Listener		
11%	Manager		
11%	Passionate		
11%	Respectful		
11%	Responsible		

Exhibit 2
ADDITIONAL AUTHENTIC LEADER TRAITS
(MENTIONED BY 1 OR 2 FACULTY)

<u>Italian Business Faculty</u>		<u>American Business Faculty</u>	
A Clear Mission	Mortal	Calm	Open
Ability to face difficulties	Motivated	Character	Optimistic
Ability to Punish	Open to Change	Competitive	Organized
Ability to Reward	Open to Experience	Confident	Organized
Able to lead by example	Perseverance	Conscientious	Passionate
Adaptive	Polite	Consensus-Builder	Patient
Ambitious	Positive	Decision-Maker	People Skills
Authoritative	Pragmatist	Decisive	Perceptive
Bold	Problem-Solver	Diplomatic	Persuasive
Brave	Prone to Change	Direct	Positive
Calm	Relational Attitude	Effective	Presentation skills
Caring	Reliable	Enthusiasm	Real
Charming	Role Model	Interpersonal skills	Realistic
Committed	Self-Aware	Experienced	Reflective
Consistent	Self-Control	Focused	Respect for others
Courageous	Self-Efficiency	Genuine	Results oriented
Creative	Self-Esteem	Goal-oriented	Self-actualized
Direct	Self-Monitoring	Communicator	Self-assured
Disruptive	Sense of Equity	Gutsy	Self-aware
Easy-Going	Sense of Teamwork	Hard-Working	Self-confident
Ego-centric	Sense of Purpose	Heart	Selfless
Ethical	Smart	Humble	Skilled
Fair	Social	Humorous	Solid work ethic
Generous	Strategic	Insightful	Storyteller
Impactful	Strong	Integrity	Strategic Thinker
Inclusive	Talkative	Intelligent	Strong
Innovative	Team-Builder	Long-term oriented	Team builder
Integrity	Tech. Background	Manager	Values
			Willing to admit mistakes
Intelligent	Transparent	Modest	Willing to make unpopular decisions
Legitimate	Unselfish	Motivated	
Magnetism	Wise	Multi-Disciplinary	
Mission-oriented			Willing to sacrifice

Exhibit 3
AUTHENTIC LEADERS MENTIONED BY AT LEAST TWO RESPONDENTS

<u>Italian Business Faculty</u>			<u>American Business Faculty</u>		
<u>Person</u>	<u>Field</u>		<u>Person</u>	<u>Field</u>	
43%	Barack Obama	Politics	20%	Mahatma Gandhi	Humanitarian
36%	Steve Jobs	Business	13%	Abraham Lincoln	Politics
32%	Nelson Mandela	Humanitarian	13%	John F. Kennedy	Politics
32%	Pope Francis	Religion	13%	Martin Luther King	Humanitarian
21%	Mahatma Gandhi	Humanitarian	13%	Ronald Reagan	Politics
21%	Martin Luther King	Humanitarian	13%	Thomas Merton	Religion
14%	Alexander The Great	Historical			
11%	John F. Kennedy	Politics			
11%	Julius Caesar	Historical			
11%	Matteo Renzi	Politics			
11%	Mother Theresa	Humanitarian			
11%	Sergio Marchionne	Business			
11%	Vladimir Putin	Politics			
7%	Alex Ferguson	Business			
7%	Fidel Castro	Politics			
7%	Leonidas	Historical			
7%	Napoleon	Historical			
7%	Silvio Berlusconi	Politics			

Exhibit 4		
FIELDS OF CITED		
AUTHENTIC LEADERS		
	Italian Business <u>Faculty</u>	American Business <u>Faculty</u>
Politics	96%	89%
Humanitarian	86%	39%
Business	68%	44%
Historical Figures	61%	
Religion	32%	22%
Sports	18%	17%
Personal	4%	28%
Military	4%	11%
Arts/Entertainment		28%

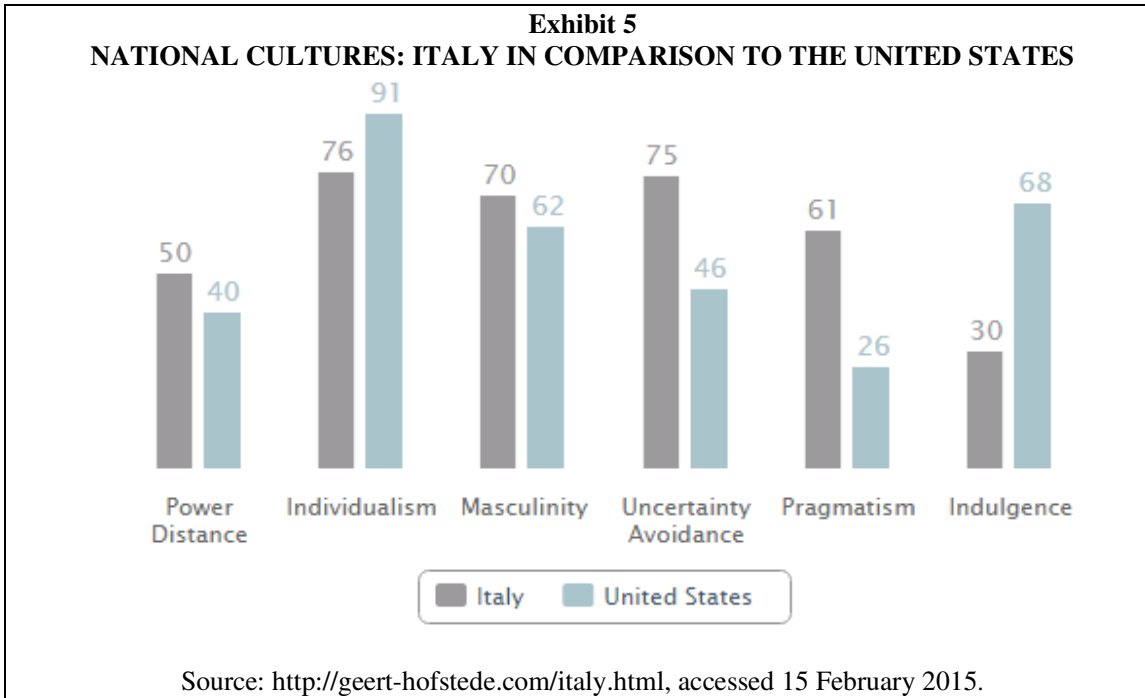


Exhibit 6		
COUNTRIES RANKING HIGHEST / LOWEST ON THE GLOBE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS		
<u>Dimension</u>	<u>Highest</u>	<u>Lowest</u>
Power Distance	Morocco, Argentina, Thailand, Spain, Russia	Denmark, Netherlands, South Africa (black sample), Israel, Costa Rica
Uncertainty Avoidance	Switzerland, Sweden, Germany (former west), Denmark, Austria	Russia, Hungary, Bolivia, Greece, Venezuela
Institutional Collectivism	Sweden, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Denmark	Greece, Hungary, Germany (former East), Argentina, Italy
In-Group Collectivism	Iran, India, Morocco, China, Egypt	Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand, Netherlands, Finland
Gender Egalitarianism	Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Denmark, Sweden	South Korea, Egypt, Morocco, India, China
Assertiveness	Germany (former East), Austria, Greece, United States, Spain	Sweden, New Zealand, Switzerland, Japan, Kuwait
Future Orientation	Singapore, Switzerland, Netherlands, Canada (English speaking), Denmark	Russia, Argentina, Poland, Italy, Kuwait
Performance Orientation	Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Taiwan, United States	Russia, Argentina, Greece, Venezuela, Italy
Human Orientation	Philippines, Ireland, Malaysia, Egypt, Indonesia	Germany (former West), Spain, France, Singapore, Brazil