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Follower Perceptions of Authentic Leadership: A Comparison between Respondents from Romania and the United States

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Abstract

As a reaction to negative examples of contemporary leadership practice in various societal areas, authentic leadership theory proposes to offer an alternative values-based model. Drawing upon the work of Kernis (2003), Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008), the present endeavor employs the concept of authentic leadership as consisting of the following four dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. Based on previous research about the influence of national culture on leadership behavior, the present endeavor develops a model, which proposes that employees in low power distance cultures perceive their leaders as more authentic than employees in secular and high power distance cultures. The hypothesis was tested among employees from Romania and USA (N = 42). The results revealed there were no significant differences between the two groups in what the four dimensions of authentic leadership are concerned. Implications for leadership research are discussed.

Keywords: authentic leadership, cultures, Romania, USA

1. Introduction

In the context of many negative leadership examples in the contemporary business realm and their impact on the economy and other societal areas, popular press authors such as leadership consultant Kevin Cashman, called for a new type of genuine and values-based leadership – authentic leadership (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). Gardner et al. (2011) investigated 91 publications that focused on authentic leadership and underlined that the description of authentic leadership begins with defining authenticity. The concept of authenticity has its roots in

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Greek philosophy and it means “to thine own self be true” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 319). Avolio and Gardner (2005) proposed the development of authentic leaders will foster the development of authentic followership “as followers internalize values and beliefs espoused by the leader their conception of what constitutes their actual and possible selves are expected to change and develop over time” (p. 327). The present endeavor investigates authentic leadership in the context of two different countries: Romania and the USA.

2. Authentic Leadership

Gardner et al. (2011) underlined that the first attempt to define leadership authenticity belonged to Hoy and Henderson (1983) and encompassed the following elements: (a) acceptance of personal and organizational responsibility for actions, outcomes and mistakes; (b) the non-manipulation of subordinates; and (c) the salience of the self over role requirements. More recently, Kernis (2003) and Avolio and Gardner (2005) proposed the following components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, authentic behavioral action. Based on these dimensions, Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008) built and validated a higher order multidimensional construct of authentic leadership.

Referring to the foundational theories of authentic leadership, Gardner et al. (2011) underlined a few approaches that researchers have employed to date. Authentic leadership researchers have applied affective process theories attribution and social perception theory, ethical leadership, neo-charismatic leadership, positive psychology, and well being/vital engagement. One of the main aspects of authentic leadership consists of the emphasis it places on the development of both the leader and follower. When followers internalize the values portrayed by the leader, their selves also develops and changes over time. It is in this process that Avolio and Gardner (2005) saw the differentiation from transformational leadership. Unlike transformational leadership which aims to transform followers, authentic leadership does not set to transform but ends up doing this by role modeling. Avolio and Gardner also differentiated between authentic leadership and servant leadership, by pointing out that servant leadership missed to recognize the mediating role of follower self-awareness and regulation, positive psychological capital and positive organization.

Though, as acknowledged by Walumbwa et al., there have been many conceptualizations of authentic leadership, their work draws on the research by Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Ilies, Morgeson, and Nahrgang (2005) for three reasons. Their research is deeply rooted in social psychological theory and research on authenticity; it articulates the central role of an internalized moral perspective to authentic leadership, and focuses on the development of authentic leaders and followers. Walumbwa et al. defined authentic leadership as follows:

a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (p. 94)

The items developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008) to measure authentic leadership were based on an extensive review of the literature on authentic leadership and development, recently completed dissertations on authentic leadership and discussions with a group of researchers and graduate students. As a result, the following domains emerged as part of the authentic leadership construct: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. Self-awareness refers to the process of authentic leaders coming to understand their unique talents, strengths, values. Relational transparency assumes that leaders are transparent about their true emotions and feelings to followers. Thirdly, the internalized moral perspective is a form of self-regulation guided by internal moral standards and values. Lastly, balanced processing refers to the process of objectively analyzing all relevant data and consulting other perspectives before making a decision. Avolio and Gardner (2005) proposed that “through increased self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modeling, authentic leaders foster the development of authenticity in followers” (p. 317).

A few years after the validation of the ALQ, Neider and Schriesheim (2011) developed and validated a new measure of authentic leadership, the Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI). The items of the ALI were built around the same four dimensions as the ALQ. The authors claimed their instrument was built on the strengths of the ALQ. However, they argued confirmatory factor analyses did not support treating authentic leadership as a universally global constructs and that future research would be better served by using separate authentic leadership dimensions

rather than aggregate or global measures, to better understand the unique aspects of the leadership construct.

3. Authentic Leadership and National Culture

In what the relationship between authentic leadership and culture is concerned, Vogelgesang, Clapp-Smith, and Palmer (2009) looked into what determined leaders to remain authentic under the pressure of other cultural experiences. According to Vogelgesang et al. the authentic leader's behavior was "guided by their values and beliefs" (p. 114). In their view, leaders will remain grounded in their moral values if they manage to differentiate between "culturally influenced moral judgments and universal moral principles" (p. 114). However, studies have shown that national culture influences the way in which followers perceive leadership behaviors such as transactional leadership (Fein, Tziner, & Vasiliu, 2010). More specifically, the positive relationship between transactional leadership behaviors and desired employees outcomes, such as satisfaction with supervisor and organizational citizenship, seemed to be stronger for employees from individualistic cultures (Walumbwa, Lawler, & Avolio, 2007). Hofstede (1980) defined national cultures in terms of five value dimensions: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and time horizon. Walumbwa et al. (2007) supported in countries with collectivistic values, employee desired outcomes are related to transformational leadership.

The present research focuses on two distinct cultures, the American and the Romanian culture. American culture is described as highly individualistic, low on power distance and uncertainty avoidance, and medium on masculinity (Hofstede, 1980). The low score on the dimension of power distance means that within American organizations, hierarchy is strictly a matter of convenience and superiors are always accessible, while leader rely on employees and teams for their expertise. The information flows between the two levels of managers and employees and communication is informal, direct and participative. Considering the transparency and sense of accountability existing in low power distance cultures, it is proposed that leaders will be perceived as more authentic.

Nowadays Romania still bears the marks of its past, which included a series of invasions, foreign occupations and, more recently, decades of Communist regime. All of the above have determined the formation and perpetuation of values such as corruption, nepotism, opportunism, social corruption, and tendency to blame others (Lewis, 2005). In addition, Lewis describes Romanians as being comfortable with ambiguity, while "the communist legacy has left them with a poor sense of accountability, responsibility, and best routes to the bottom line" (p. 328). In what leadership is concerned, Romanian managers are slowly constructing their own model of leadership, which is very similar to the Italian style, "autocratic but paternalistic and using emotion as a manipulative tool" (Lewis, 2005, p. 325). Hutu (2010), a Romanian researcher of organizational culture, also argues that decisions and control are centralized. Employees prefer working in groups, while middle and top management expresses preference for more individualistic attitudes (Hutu, 2010). Hutu (2010) underlined Romanians expect top management to make all the decisions and most of the time followers are often afraid to express their own opinions (high power distance). In addition, the reticence of top managers in including them in the discussions deprives the decision-making process of valuable input. In the context of high power distance cultures, such as that of Romania in which leaders do not share information but rather lead with an iron fist, it is highly likely that leaders will be perceived as less authentic. Thus the hypothesis of the present endeavor supports:

Employees from low power distance cultures will perceive their leaders as more authentic (on each of the four dimensions: relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and self-awareness) when compared with employees in high-power distance cultures.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants were selected with the help of snowball sampling via social media (Facebook). The final sample

consisted of 42 respondents (17 male and 25 female). Half of the respondents belonged to a low power culture and the other half belonged to the high power distance culture. The demographic characteristics concerning age and tenure are presented in Tables 1-2 below. The distribution of the respondents from the two countries is presented in Table 3. The sample consisted from respondents in the researcher's social media network, a majority of which work in the following industries: education, IT, media.

Table 1

Demographic information (Age)

Age	Employee %
18-24	16.7%
25-30	31.0%
31-40	26.2%
41-50	21.4%
51-60	4.8%
Over 60 years old	-

Table 2

Demographic information (tenure with leader)

Tenure	Employee %
Less than 2 years	21.4%
2-5 years	42.9%
5-10 years	23.8%
Over 10 years	11.9%

Table 3

Culture

Country	Employee %
Romania	50%
USA	50%

4.2. Measures

The questionnaire included questions on all the variables under study. The Authentic Leadership Inventory (Neider and Schriesheim, 2011) was employed to measure authentic leadership as perceived by followers. Neider and Schriesheim (2011) developed a questionnaire which covers the same dimensions as the ALQ: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. The researchers supported they have built the questionnaire on the strengths of the ALQ. The response format is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "disagree strongly" to "agree strongly." The employees were asked to note the extent to which they agreed with the statements about their leader (immediate supervisor). Support for content validity, factor structure, convergent, discriminant, and concurrent validity was found in the study that validated the scale. The final version of the questionnaire contains 14 questions. Reliability analysis indicated acceptable alpha values for the four ALI scales (.74, .81, .83, and .85). A sample item is: "My leader shows consistency between his/her beliefs and actions." The reliability scores for the two samples included in the research are presented in Table 4 and 5.

Table 4
Reliability of the Scales in the Romanian Sample

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Relational transparency	3	.79
Internalized moral perspective	4	.71
Balanced processing	4	.84
Self-awareness	3	.69

Data on culture was obtained by asking participants to fill in the country of origin and the responses were coded according to Hofstede's (1980) classification of countries as having low and high power distance cultures, the United States and Romania. In addition, the study included the control variable of age and tenure with the leader. These demographic variables were included in previous studies of authentic leadership for their potential influence on outcome variables (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008)

A small scale pilot study was conducted with 2 respondents from Romania who gave feedback on the questionnaire. The respondents reported they understood the questions as formulated in English. Cabanda, Fields, and Winston (2011) noted that a pilot study will help ensure items in the questionnaire are valid and reliable. The scale employed was developed and has been validated by previous studies, thus ensuring content validity.

4.3. Procedure

The research was conducted via online Google Docs Forms survey system through the administration of questionnaires during the Fall of 2013. In order to have a better view of how authentic leadership is perceived by followers in low versus high power distance countries, the present endeavor employed a sample of respondents selected with the help of the snowball technique via social media (Facebook).

The survey contained 19 questions and based on pilot testing, took approximately three to five minutes to complete. The questionnaire was administered in English. In the pilot test phase, the Romanian respondents reported a good understanding of all the items in the questionnaire. In many organizational contexts in Romania, employees use English on a daily basis. The author posted a message to contacts in Facebook from the U.S. and Romania, asking them to fill out the survey and to forward it to their contacts as well. Each questionnaire had an opening statement regarding the purpose of the research and an informed consent making the participants aware that the completion of the survey represents the agreement to participate in the study.

5. Results

A 2x2x2 factorial ANOVA was conducted to assess the impact of the impact of the control variables of age and gender, as well as the independent variable of culture on the four authentic leadership dimensions. Before performing the analysis, each control variable was recoded and divided into two groups based on the median in each group: Age (Group 1: ≤ 40 ; Group 2: 41- 60) and tenure (Group 1: ≤ 5 ; Group 2: 5+). The results indicated no significant interaction effects for the four dimensions of authentic leadership ($p > .05$). None of the control variables had a significant influence on the dependent variables.

There was not a statistical difference between the Romanian and the USA group in what self-awareness is concerned ($F(1,41) = .291, p = .59$). There was not a significant difference between the Romanian and the USA group in what relational transparency ($F(1,41) = .026, p = .87$). There was not a significant difference between the Romanian and the USA group in what internalized moral perspective is concerned ($F(1,41) = .405, p = .53$). There was not a significant difference between the Romanian and the USA group in what balanced processing is concerned ($F(1,41) = .085, p = .77$). The difference in means is presented for each dimension in the figures below.

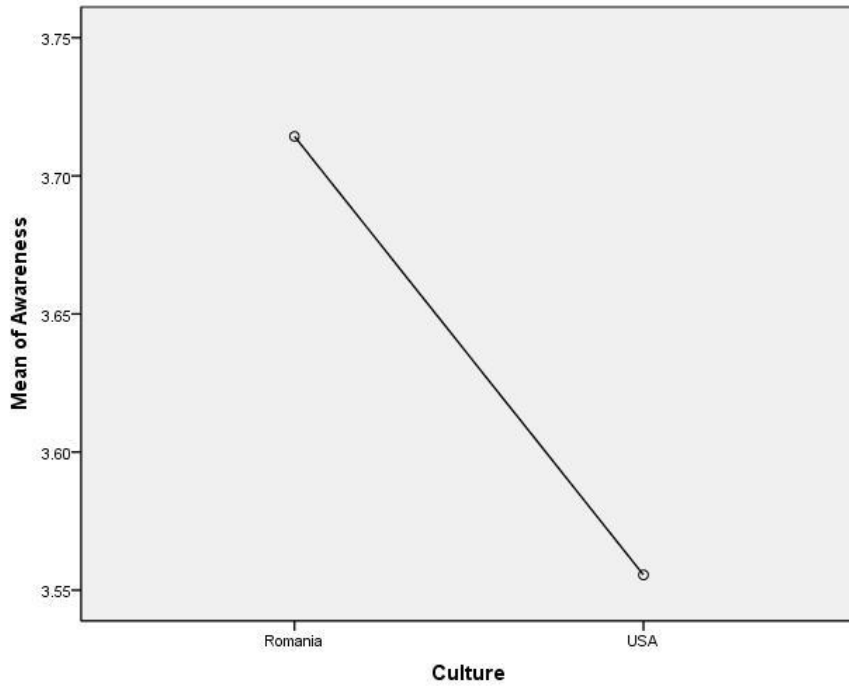


Fig. 1. Means plot for self awareness dimension.

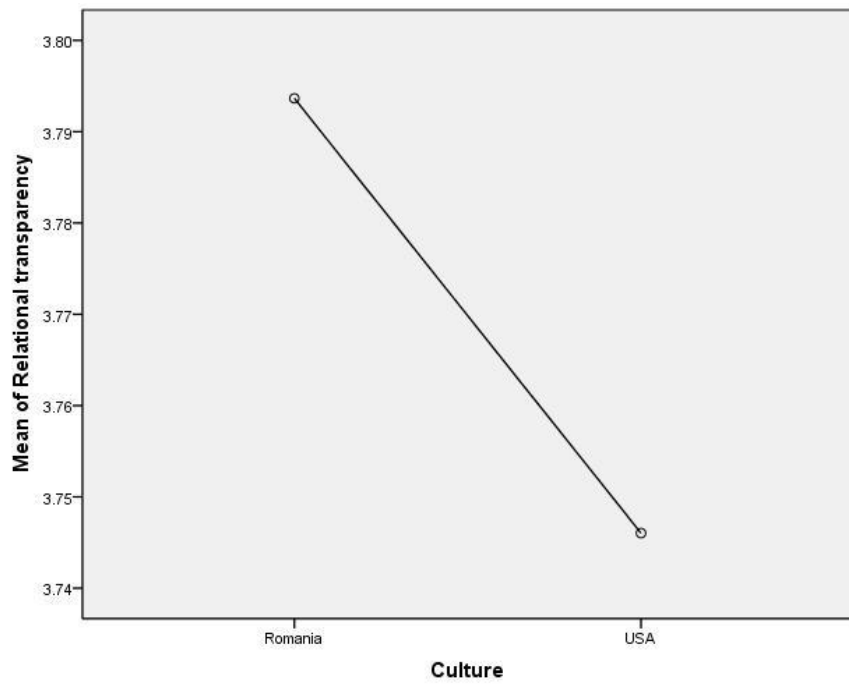


Fig. 2. Means plot for relational transparency dimension.

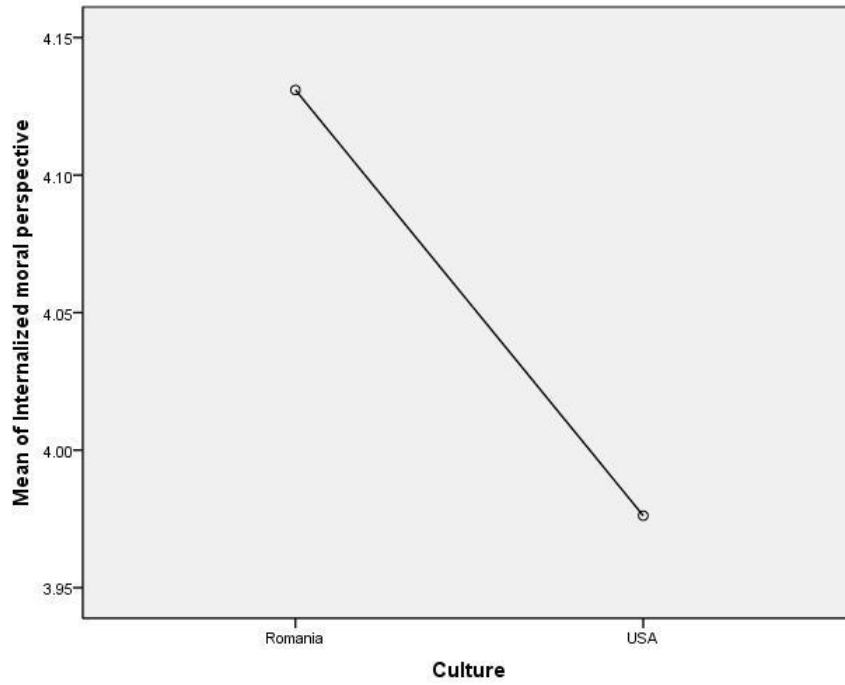


Fig. 3. Means plot for internalized moral perspective dimension.

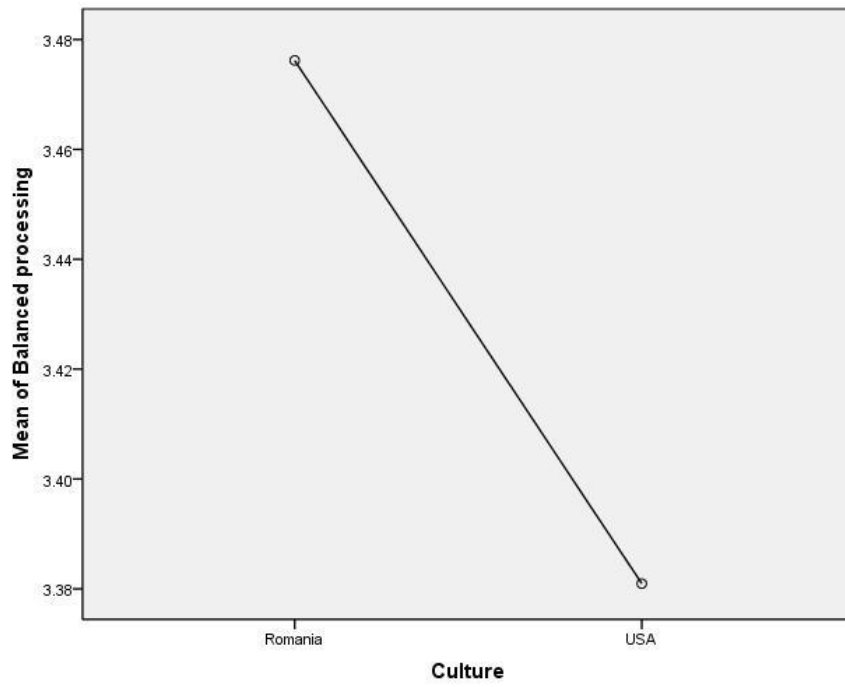


Fig. 4. Means plot for balanced processing dimension.

The results indicated there were no significant differences between followers in the low power distance and high power distance cultures in terms of follower perceptions of the four dimensions of authentic leadership: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective. One of the possible explanations is that to the knowledge of the author, many of the respondents in the Romanian sample are employed in multinational companies in which employee-leadership relationships tend to be more informal. Still it was surprising that no difference was obtained in what balanced processing is concerned, as literature indicated managers in Romania are reticent to include employees in their decisions (Hutu, 2010). While the research should be extended to a larger sample, the present initial results indicate that Romanian managers are perceived as displaying the four dimensions of authentic leadership. More specifically, they are perceived as having a good level of self-knowledge, being open with and sharing information, guided by internal moral standards, and asking for input before making a decision. These initial results are relevant since leaders' attitude and actions play an important role during crisis situations. Yukl (2006) underlined that many leaders avoid taking action and default to a state of denial and wishful thinking. Authentic leaders acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses and analyze all relevant data before making a decision (Walumbwa et al., 2008), two important aspects in crisis situations. In addition, Yukl noted self-confidence is important in a crisis, "where success often depends on the perception by subordinates that the leader has the knowledge and courage necessary to deal with the crisis effectively" (p. 200). A crisis is a stressful situation and people need to be informed about the progress being made (Yukl, 2006). In this sense, an authentic leader is very suitable because he/she is transparent and openly shares information.

One of the limitations of the present study refers to the small sample (N=42). Future research should include more respondents to increase the chances of detecting statistically significant differences (Pallant, 2010). Another limitation refers to the control variables included. The research could have included other control variables such as industry.

The present endeavour proposed to focus on authentic leadership, a leadership approach relevant for crisis situations, as it is proposed to restore trust in leadership. As such, the research investigated whether employees in low-power distance cultures perceive their leaders as more authentic than their counterparts in high-power distance cultures. Perceptions of authentic leadership did not differ between respondents in the low and high power distance cultures. In order to further test the relationship between culture and authentic leadership, future research should include samples from other countries with high power distance cultures such as China.

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