
A Cross-Cultural Study of Leadership in Further Education

Bob Pithers
University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract

Good leadership has been found to be associated with organisational effectiveness. This situation appears to be just as applicable in the case of educational organizations as it is for other types of organizations. This paper reports on the findings of an empirical, cross-cultural study of the perceptions of leadership of a group of Chinese and Australian further and higher education teachers and human-resource professionals. Comparative measures were acquired of the 'teachers' preferred leadership styles and of a range of other situational factors said to influence the success or otherwise, of a particular leader. The results indicated very few cross-cultural differences, although gender differences were found, all of which were unexpected.

Introduction

Leadership is seen to be an important factor in those mix of independent variables associated with both effectiveness and efficiency in most if not all organizations (Bass, 1999). This appears to be just as much the case in institutions whose role is concerned with post-compulsory or further and higher education as it is in school education or indeed, in any other area of organisational management. Rowley (1997) has stressed that effective leadership is essential to all educational institutions, including tertiary education and furthermore, that it is important to all managers at all levels and not just senior managers. This is partly because further education managers and teachers are faced with increasing leadership challenges (Bond & Boak, 1996) and because these people are under increasing pressure to make decisions and act quickly and decisively. Leadership is seen to be the act of influencing others towards the achievement of organisational goals (Robbins, 2003, p. 314). It is, therefore, concerned with change, development and transformation within an educational organization (Scott, 1999). In this sense, any teacher is at least potentially, a leader and manager of teaching and learning.

Within the democratic Western tradition, certainly 'strong' leadership is seen to have an important part to play in organisational and personal change (Yukl, 1994). Eastern cultures also have had a long history of valuing 'good' or effective leadership. Indeed, in the Chinese culture and value system, leadership has been an important and consistent component for change, valued over many years (Huang, 1988; Wong, 2001). Nonetheless, a number of workers in the field of leadership have used their research findings to point out some quite significant differences between Western and Chinese concepts of leadership and power. For example, Pye (1985, pp. 27-28) and Bond and Hwang (1986, p. 251), have drawn attention to the notion, that in many Asian cultures, leaders are expected to be not only benevolent, nurturing and kind but also capable of swift, decisive action, even if expressed using a directive, even autocratic style; a style not currently much valued in Western educational leaders, where more democratic, collaborative styles usually prevail.

Nevertheless, some published cross-cultural research in the general management development area such as that by Littrell (2002), has pointed to the difficulty in transferring Western research results (even those obtained in Westernised places like Singapore and Hong Kong) to leadership in main land Chinese situations. For example, Littrell found as a result of research completed, a significant difference between the Chinese managers as leaders, when compared to non-Chinese on the factor "tolerance of freedom".

In the education arena more specifically, Spencer-Oatey (1997) has argued, based on the results of her study of Chinese and British tutor-student role relationships in higher education, that there is support for the claim that Asian leadership differs qualitatively from Western leadership at least in this field. Differences such as these, if they do exist more widely, can mean that Chinese students, studying in Western countries such as Australia or Australian higher and further education teachers teaching in China, may value different leadership styles and behaviours. They may also expect that those of the 'other' cultural group will, over time, move in their practice, towards their own national leadership cultural norms. As workers such as Spencer-Oatey (1997) have pointed out, however, such cultural leadership adaptation may not be easy to implement in a practical way.

Pratt (1992) carried out a study, which examined how Chinese adult educators viewed learning and teaching. He found that, notwithstanding the conceptions of teaching and learning espoused by the Chinese, there was an implied assumption of subordination by the individual to the expertise and wisdom of their teacher, which was consistent with Chinese cultural values. He put this down to possibly, a Chinese cultural context based on family structures, in which individuals are bound by strong traditional values such as perseverance, obedience and loyalty; duty being more important than individual rights.

Nonetheless, a literature search revealed a dearth of published articles about educational leadership in further educational institutions, based on Western-Chinese cross-cultural comparisons. On the basis of those few cross-cultural publications, which often represent results obtained in the wider non-educational organisational leadership area, it would seem that differences about leadership style and different leadership expectations and perceptions appear to exist. It should be noted, however, that these are often based on very limited research generalisations in the organisational leadership area. In fact, any presently suspected cross-cultural differences in leadership styles and behaviour may turn out to be tenuous ones or even be greater than was originally expected. Presently, based on available information, we simply do not know.

In order to add some modest data to the sparse amount presently available about cross-cultural educational leadership, the present research reports on a recent study of leadership based on similar groups of Australian and main land Chinese teachers in the area of higher and further education.

One concern with studies of this kind, of course, are the many potential problems concerning the meaning of the various leadership terms and variables to people in different cultures. One way of minimising or at least reducing this important methodological issue, is to attempt to standardise the measuring instrument, which

will form the basis of the measurement of pertinent leadership variables (as well as to provide for a common basis for translation from English to Chinese). This was the approach taken in the present study.

The actual 'scientific' measurement of leadership concepts and variables has had a relatively short history. There have been many varied approaches, which have theorised about leadership and attempted to explain and predict how 'good' leadership might influence personal action and organisational change. As well, there have been various attempts to work out which variables or salient aspects or features of leadership are associated with transformation and development (see DuBrin, 2004 for a review of the major theories). One approach, termed the 'trait' approach, for example, has attempted to identify those personal traits or characteristics of the leader that appear to be associated with effective influence and change. Another more complicated theoretical approach, termed the "leadership style" approach (DuBrin, 2004), attempted to define and suggest the one 'best' leadership style or set of behaviours (eg. Democratic or more directive), applicable in an organisational context.

More recent approaches to the measurement, explanation and prediction of effective leadership and the adoption of an appropriate leadership style or set of behaviours in practice, have been concerned with the leader's preferred leadership style as well as the situation in which the leader needs to act. This theoretical position means that a leader needs to take account of certain salient factors or variables in a context, before deciding on a relevant leadership style or at least attempt to change those aspects of the situation to suit their preferred style. That is why these theories are often termed 'contingency theories' of leadership (DuBrin, 2004); the leader's mode of action is contingent upon an analysis of a particular situation. Of course, just what are defined as the 'salient' features of any situation, depends on the particular contingency theory chosen.

Nevertheless, one reasonably rigorous contingency theory was that proposed by Fiedler (1967). It is a theory not much used in practical workplaces today because it is considered by many managers to be too complicated (DuBrin, 2004, p. 140). Nevertheless, it has been much researched and has the advantage, at least as a basis for research work, to include a range of potentially useful measurable, situational variables. Fiedler was able to operationalise the variables of interest and developed a leadership scale to measure them. At the outset, the scale incorporates a measure of the leader's preferred leadership style: referred to as the Least Preferred Co worker (LPC) scale. The outcome here is a score, which indicates whether the leader is more 'task', 'socio-independent' or 'relationship' oriented or motivated. Socio-independent was considered to be a balanced or mixed style position. Fiedler (1967) thought that a leader's preferred style position was relatively fixed and immutable.

Next, the situation in which the leader will operate is analysed in terms of whether it is a high, moderate or low control one. It is assumed that if a leader can exercise more control in a situation, then that situation will be more favourable for them. The control classifications occur after the situation is analysed and rated in three major areas. Firstly, the Leader-member relations (LMR) is a scale which measures how well the group works together and the extent of their relationships. Second, is the Task Structure (TS) scale, which indicates how well or precisely the work goals, job tasks

and job evaluation are defined. The TS scale also measures the leader's prior training and leadership experience. Lastly, a Position-power (PP) scale is employed, which examines issues such as the leader's status and power to evaluate, reward or punish their subordinates.

Theoretically, this is a contingency theory based on a leader-situation match notion. Leadership effectiveness is presumed to be more efficacious if the leader is matched to a situation, where they can exercise more control. Fiedler's theory suggested that task-motivated leaders would perform best in either 'high' or 'low' control situations. Socio-independent or 'balanced' leaders or so he predicted, would perform best in situations of high control, whilst relationship-oriented leaders would perform best in 'moderate' control situations.

It is not the purpose of the present study nor does space allow it, to critically examine the many hundreds of research publications, based on predictions from Fiedler's theory. Suffice to say, that they have been mixed in support, although there has been more support for Fiedler's predictions, based on task-motivated leaders than there has for relationship-oriented leaders (see DuBrin, 2004, p. 104). Fiedler's scale is a relatively older one and is somewhat cumbersome to use in work practice. For these reasons, it is not much used for predictive purposes in a practical sense, in the work place today. Nevertheless, for the purposes of the present study, it was viewed as being a useful instrument, because it is detailed enough to allow some meaningful comparisons between a range of situational variables, likely to have a bearing on the success or failure in practice of any chosen leadership style.

In the present study, therefore, a modified version of Fiedler's (1967) leadership scale was used with a group of Australian and Chinese higher and further educational professionals. The results were then compared for leader's 'match' with the stipulated situation as well as separately, for the different components of the leadership scale. Cross-cultural comparisons were thus possible by examining the final leadership-match outcomes as well as overall, for any differences in the LPC style scores and for any differences in the three situational variables measured. It was difficult to make any specific predictions, because of the dearth of relevant published cross-cultural research results in the field of further education (especially using this research instrument). Nevertheless, it was expected, based on the very limited cross-cultural evidence that was available, that there might be significant between-group differences, especially using this Western leadership instrument. Anecdotal evidence obtained by the author, based on working in central China, suggested that a much more task-oriented style would be more likely to be reported, that is when compared to similar Australians working in tertiary education.

Method

Subjects

Both the Australian and the Chinese groups were samples of convenience. The Chinese sample available for study was the smaller of the two and was composed of 11 men and 15 women. The Australian sample was larger but a decision was taken to match the samples on the basis of gender and so only the first 11 men and 15 Australian women on the data file were used in the study. This gave a total N=52 and two equally sized national samples of 26 individuals. They were all students of an Australian university completing a Masters degree course. The Australian sample

attended a local course, whereas the Chinese sample were all employed by a Chinese further and higher educational institution in central China, that focussed on vocational and professional courses and were completing their studies in China. In both groups, the age range was from approximately the late 20s-50s years. They all had a minimum of approximately 5 years experience working in education. Each group was composed mostly of practising further education teachers with some ex teachers who were now in further education, management roles. The Chinese subjects knew some English but they were not fluent English speakers or writers.

Research instruments and procedure

The research instrument was a slightly modified version of Fiedler's (1967) leadership scale (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1990, pp. 415-421). The instrument was provided separately to the Australian and to the Chinese sample and was completed in one sitting. The only difference in the procedure was that the instructions and questionnaire was translated step-by-step orally into the Cantonese language at their sitting. This was done to try to ensure that all of the Chinese subjects could, first of all, decide whether they wanted to be involved in the study and to have their data included as well as to improve the reliability or accuracy of their results. They were also permitted to ask questions, through the translator to the researcher at any time. All subjects remained anonymous. A short survey was also completed by the Chinese subjects, which asked them about their views on educational leadership in China. There were a series of statements provided about leadership (eg. "A good leader should be an effective communicator") and their judgement about each statement was linked to a 5-point, Likert scale.

Results

The Likert-scale data obtained was at a level of measurement deemed appropriate for some limited parametric statistical analysis. A 2x2 (Nationality vs Gender) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), applied to the LPC data, showed no significant main effects for either Nationality (Australian v Chinese) or Gender ($F=.56$ and $.76$, respectively; $p<.05$ - this is the critical value used for all further tests of significance). The interaction effect, however, was significant ($F= 11.3$). This effect indicated that the Chinese men, on average, scored higher on the LPC scale (ie. were more relationship motivated) than did the Australian men (means of 79 and 65, respectively). The effect was reversed for the Australian women who scored higher on the LPC scale than the Chinese women (means of 84 and 66, respectively).

There were no other between-group significant main or interaction effects found when a similar ANOVA was applied to the Leader Member Relations (LMR) or to the Task Structure (TS) scales. For the Position-power (PP) scale, a similar ANOVA also showed no significant main effects but again there was a significant interaction effect ($F= 4.96$). The data showed that, whereas the Chinese and Australian females obtained a similar mean score for the PP scale (6.1 and 6.9, respectively), the Chinese men scored higher than the Australian men (mean of 6.7 and 5.1, respectively). This result indicated that the Chinese men perceived that they exercised significantly more position status and power in their educational institution than did the Australian men.

The overall results of the data obtained from all of the research instrument's scales, for each individual, allowed a final evaluation of the 'leader-situation match' in each case. This allowed for the arrangement of the data obtained in this circumstance to be

structured into a 2x2 frequency tally (Nationality and 'match'/no 'match'), which was then subjected to a Chi-square analysis. There was no between-group difference obtained for the frequency of leader-situation 'matches' for the two national samples (Chi-square= .78). There were 16 (52%) Chinese and 15 (48%) Australian, leader-situation 'matches' found. In order to minimise repetition, the major survey results from the short survey, are provided and discussed in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study did not point to many major, between-group differences between the two national samples, which was somewhat unexpected. This was despite the suggestions from other published research, which had suggested the possibility of some major cross-cultural differences between Chinese and Western leadership styles, although much of this scant evidence had been obtained from the more general management field and not in the area of further education.

Indeed, the application of a Western-style, contingency leadership instrument with a main land Chinese sample, might have been expected to show up differences in both leadership style and in some of the situational variables examined or so it was assumed. This was not found to be the case, however, in that the results showed very few between-group national differences. Of course, on another tack, the reliability and validity of the Fiedler leadership scale is quite another issue.

On average, the leader-situation match concept appeared to work, just as effectively, (in terms of 'match' frequency) with the Chinese subjects as it did for the Australian sample. As well as this finding, the cross-cultural, between-group results for the LPC scale, showed that both groups of higher and further education professionals, on average, tended to be relationship-oriented or motivated. This is not surprising, given both groups were engaged in a relatively social occupation, dealing with late adolescent and adult students, where communication and social skills are a strong role expectation.

One significant cross-cultural, between-group difference that was found, however, concerned preferred leadership style. This concept lies at the heart of the Fiedler leadership theory and is considered to be relatively permanent aspect of the leader's behaviour that is difficult to change (DuBrin, 2004). The results revealed that the Chinese men, on average, scored higher or were more 'relationship oriented', than were the Australian men, while the reverse was true for the Chinese and Australian women. This outcome was not expected, partly because of the more structured and controlled situation of institutional teaching in a relatively bureaucratic, provincial Chinese education establishment in which Party members have at least as much power as academic managers. Added to this fact, was the more formal, teacher-centred approach to communication and teaching style of the Chinese teachers, where a less student-centred approach, than that used on average in similar Western educational organizations, appeared to be commonplace.

Nevertheless, discussions with members of the Chinese sample indicated that most of them thought that an 'effective' Chinese leader also needed to be very consultative and caring. There is some limited collaborative support for this finding in the work of Pratt (1992), where using Chinese adult education teachers, as mentioned earlier, he found that his subjects tended to be bound by a strong Chinese tradition involving

obedience, loyalty, perseverance and duty. Added to this viewpoint, however, was Pratt, Kelly and Wong's (1999) finding, that in traditional Chinese society, each person must assume responsibility for those below them in the hierarchy.

The Chinese men, compared to their Australian counterparts, also scored higher on the 'position-power' scale, whilst there were no real differences between the samples of women on this factor. In this case, the Chinese men but not the women perceived that they had greater position status and power in their institutional roles than their Australian counterparts. Once again, this difference may be because of the added position status and power of Chinese men in similar positions, based on Chinese cultural gender norms, when compared to the Australian male educators. Furthermore, there may be a relationship, at least for the Chinese men, between higher perceived status as an educational leader, their perceived stronger position power and their stronger 'relationship-motivated' style but the present results do not shed more light on this issue so that what, if anything, this may be, at the present time still remains unclear. Certainly some of the Chinese thought that they needed 'power' for effective decision-making and, when necessary, quick and decisive action.

Interestingly, the survey results from the Chinese sample, indicated that many of them, although based on their limited knowledge of Western tertiary teaching context, did not actually see Chinese educational leaders at a tertiary education level as being much different from those in Australia (mean=3.1; this and all following figures in brackets are based on a 5-point, Likert scale). Furthermore, on average, they thought that: a 'good' further education leader should be consultative (1.6) and 'strongly agreed' that the leader should be an effective communicator with staff (1.2); they were less sure that subordinates should always contribute to any decision making process (2.7). They tended to more 'strongly disagree' with the statement that subordinates should not question a leader's decisions (4.6) and also 'disagreed' with the view that big decisions should be made only by the leader, without much discussion (4.3). These appear to be the sorts of results commonly found in survey studies of leadership and communication in Western countries. Nevertheless, the Chinese tended, on average, to 'agree' with the statement that an educational leader should be 'strict and tough' (2.3); a finding which may be at some odds with western expectations of 'good' educational leaders.

Nevertheless, to return to the main theme, what differences did emerge in this small study, may suggest that where there are gender-based cross-cultural differences but only among leadership style. There may also be national-based gender differences in those aspects of leadership concerned with different national views of power and status in defining a leadership 'situation'. Nevertheless, in all other respects, the lack of any major differences was the most striking finding of the present study, concerned as it was with leadership styles and the leader-situation match concept in the context of further education.

References

- Bass, B M 1999, 'Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership', *European Journal of Work and organizational Psychology*, vol.8, pp.9-32.

- Bond, R & Boak, T 1996 'Post-secondary educational leadership: preparing for the brave new world', *International Journal of Educational Management*, vol.10, pp.21-25.
- Bond, M H & Hwang, R 1986 'The social psychology of Chinese people', in *The psychology of the Chinese people*, eds M H Bond, OUP, Hong Kong.
- DuBrin, A J 2004 *Leadership: Research findings, practice and skills*, Houghton Mifflin Co., New York.
- Fiedler, F 1967 *A theory of leadership effectiveness*, McGraw Hill, New York.
- Huang, R 1988 *China: A macro history*, Sharpe, New York.
- Ivancevich, J & Matteson, M 1990 *Organizational behavior and management*, BPI Irwin, Boston, MA.
- Litterell, R F 2002 'Desirable leadership behaviours of multi-cultural managers in China', *The Journal of Management Development*, vol.21, pp.5-74.
- Pratt, D 1992 'Chinese conceptions of learning and teaching', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol.11, pp.301-349.
- Pratt, D, Kelly, M & Wong, W 1999 'Chinese conceptions of effective teaching in Hong Kong', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol.18, pp.241-258.
- Pye, L W 1985 *Asian power and politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Robbins, S P 2003 *Organizational behavior*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Rowley, J 1997 'Academic leaders: made or born?' *Industrial and Commercial Training*, vol.29, pp.78-84.
- Scott, G 1999 *Change matters: Making a Difference in Education and training*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Spencer-Oatey, H 1997 'Unequal relationships in high and low power distance societies: A comparative study of tutor-student role relations in Britain and China', *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, vol.28, pp.284-302.
- Yukl, G 1994 *Leadership in organisations*, Prentice Hall, New York.
- Wong, K C 2001 'Chinese culture and leadership', *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, vol.4, pp.309-319.

Australian Vocational Education Review
Volume 12 No 1

Contents

Industry Convergence, New Industries and Vocational Teaching: A case study	Page 1
Lyn Firminger	
A Cross-Cultural Study of Leadership in Further Education	Page 11
Bob Pithers	
Learning Support Workers in Further Education Colleges in England: a first report	Page 19
Bill Bailey and Jocelyn Roberts	
Promoting Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) for all: Issues, Concerns and Prospects with particular reference to developing countries	Page 23
Rupert MacLean	
Pathways and Transitions for Mature Aged Job Seekers	Page 35
Barrie Brennan	
NOTES TO INTENDING CONTRIBUTORS	Page 42

The *Australian Vocational Education Review* is the journal of the **Centre for Learning Research**, Faculty of Education, Griffith University, Nathan 4111, Australia. The Review is published twice a year in May and November.

Annual subscription rates for the Review is \$55
Individual back copies are available for \$15 each

Articles submitted are *blind peer reviewed* and referees reports will usually be forwarded to the writer. Three copies of manuscripts should be forwarded to the editor. The Review welcomes book reviews and items of interest to its reader audience. Details about the preparation of manuscripts are available at the back of this journal. Permission to reproduce articles from the Australian Vocational Education review should be sought from the Editor in writing.

Manuscripts and correspondence concerning reviews should be addressed to:
Fred Beven
Editor
Australian Vocational Education Review
School of Vocational, Community and Technology Education
Faculty of Education
Griffith University
Queensland 4111
ph 61 7 3875 5889
fax 61 7 3875 6868
Email f.beven@griffith.gu.edu.au

Correspondence associated with subscriptions, back issues and advertising should be addressed to:
Mr Dick Roebuck
Centre for Learning Research
Faculty of Education
Griffith University
Queensland 4111
ph 61 7 3875 5862
fax 61 7 3875 6868
Email r.roebuck@griffith.gu.edu.au

Please note: views expressed in contributions to the Australian Vocational Education Review are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centre for Learning Research.

The Centre acknowledges the support given to the preparation and publication of this journal by the Faculty of Education, Griffith University.

ISSN - 1321-3954



australian
vocational
education
review

Vol 12
No 1
2005

CENTRE FOR LEARNING RESEARCH