

POWER DISTANCE CULTURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FOLLOWERSHIP IDENTITY

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Abstract

Cultural values shape the mind and behaviour of the people and numerous researches has empirically signified this phenomenon. Culture tends to become the crucial point for determining the effective leadership and followership and to develop the positive working environment and power distance is one of the cultural dimensions that bind leadership/followership thinking and attribute. With regard to the followership research, mainstream organizational literatures indicate that this area is relatively unexplored. With the recent notion that follower has come into prominence with the increasing effect of followers on the decision making process, it is important to further investigate this area. This study was conducted to examine how the followership was constructed and how their identities were enacted within the power distance culture. It is a qualitative study, utilizing in-depth interviews with 20 employees in Malaysian higher education sector, using purposive sampling. The interview were digitally recorded and transcribed and the data was analysed manually following the qualitative procedures. Findings demonstrate that in higher power distance culture, the followers were more of dependent type, subdued behaviours, high obedience to higher authority and conform to the leaders' directives. In organizational studies, these prominent features need to be embraced appropriately so as not to be the inhibiting factors to the development of creative and innovative society, as has been laid out in the country's transformation plan and strategies to achieve the developed nation, and able to compete at the global arena.

Keywords: Power distance culture, followership, identity, organizational studies, leadership.

1. Introduction

Culture shapes the society's core values and norms, which are shared and transmitted from one generation to another through social learning processes of modelling and observation, as well as through the effect of one own actions (Bandura, 1986). It can be defined on different levels of analysis, ranging from a group level to organizational level and even a national level. Schein (1990) explains how culture operates within a group over a period of time and formed as knowledge to solve life problems and survival. Once a group has learned to hold common assumptions about adaptation to the environment, its members respond in similar patterns

of perception, thought, emotion, and behaviour to external stimuli. This is called a belief that plays important roles in shaping people's mind and behaviour. Sooner or later, this belief inevitably would be translated into the people's conduct, and become the cultural power (Schein, 1990) that might bring certain impact on organizational structures, processes and employees' behaviour.

With regard to organizational environment, cultural values finely resonate along with the organization progress. Culture and leadership/followership are perceived as 'two side of the same coin'. When organization start, there is always a preferred way of doing things in the organization and those preferences are going to be imposed on the people in that organization. This will eventually become the practice of that organization and mutually agreed by the leaders and followers. The cognitive approach is embedded in many definition of culture (Erez & Earley, 1993). For example, Triandis (1980) represents the anthropological approach, defining culture as patterned ways of thinking. Cognitive model of information processing explains how information from external environment is selectively recognized, evaluated, and interpreted in terms of its meaning for the individual and how its effects behaviour (Erez & Earley, 1993). Hofstede (1991) proposes five cultural dimensions based on his extensive research namely: power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation and masculinity. This research focuses only on one dimension, that is the power distance culture, to investigate its impact on the followership in organization.

Followership has been given little attention in organizational literature (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Shamir (2007) claims that in traditional research bias shapes the perception on followers, so they are viewed only as "recipients or moderators of the leader's influence and as vehicles for the actualization of the leader's vision, mission or goals." Moreover, leadership research has monopolised the organizational studies since many decades ago. The focus was mainly on leaders attribute and developing the leadership skills and capabilities." (Shamir, 2007). It is widely accepted that leadership study seems to be more important than the subordinates, as the leaders are believed to be the driving force of success of the organization, and are able to influence the behaviour of the people in the organization.

Undeniably, the success of the leadership in performing their jobs was closely related to the leader-follower relationship. This research explores the follower-centred perspective in which the interrelationship between leaders and followers is viewed as focal instead of simply leadership or the leader. It examines how that interrelationship affects their performance in social context; that is the cultural context. It is necessary to understand the followers from deeper lenses as it would lead into the understanding of how followers perform and how the leadership-followership processes develops (Yukl, 2012).

2. Problem Statement

In a high power distance cultures, the lower level staff would try to avoid discussing or giving different opinions against the higher level leader. This phenomenon has already become the norm in power distance working culture. In contrast, in low power distance cultures, everyone has the right to give opinions, suggestions and ideas regardless of ranking or background and leaders that perceived as autocratic would be rejected. In this country, the power distance culture is rooted in deeply held values in the larger culture, which seem difficult to make changes. Malaysia has highest score of power distance; that is 104 according to Hofstede comparative power distance index. This large gap in division of power was traced back due to a joint legacy of the Malay feudal system and the influence of the British colonialisation. As a result, Malay culture highly respect social status, social class and titles, and tends to grant much power to those at the top of an organization. The status gap would

possibly create communication barriers, that higher level leaders might think its organization is performing good, whilst the subordinates are hesitate to bring forward new ideas. This condition would not motivate people to be creative and innovative, rather they were just follow to top-down instruction. Differences in personalities, backgrounds, and experiences are not appreciated.

3.0 Literature Review

The literature section will elaborate in detail on the three main concepts utilised in this research, namely: Culture and power distance, followership and followership identity.

3.1 National culture

The word culture carries different meanings. Some scholars, for example Schweder and Levine (1984) see culture from cognitive perspective as a shared meaning system and Hofstede (1980) describes culture as collective mental programming that control individuals' responses in a given context. Members of a culture will share certain mind sets that cause them to interpret situations and events in generally similar ways, while persons from other cultures and mind sets are likely to interpret them differently (Erez & Early, 1993). Culture in this sense is a powerful force that shapes and influences the cognitions of the people. In the terms of cultural self-representation theory, it forms a shared knowledge structure capable of reducing the variability of individual responses (Erez & Early, 1993). In this way culture contributes to a cognitive framework and behavioural repertoire that members of the culture will use to both interpret and respond to situations. As Adler (2002) notes, the subconscious influence of these internalized norms and expectations may be the source of cross-cultural misinterpretations.

Organizational culture on the other hand, is shaped mainly by dominant groups and by reinforcing the values of groups in power (Velsor et al., 2010). Organizational culture implicates the social identity of the staff. According to them, often the dominant groups have wider influence in shaping the silent languages of an organization in all forms; explicit communication and policies, implicit communication (such as the grapevine and informal networks), and technical aspects such as procedures and requirements. Thus, organizational culture teaches the leaders and followers to externally adapt and internally integrate with the workplace environment and problems, and need to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to organizational circumstances (Schien, 2004).

3.1.1 Power Distance Culture

Power Distance basically deals with human inequality. Inequality can occur in areas such as prestige, wealth, and power. Hofstede (2001) define PD as the degree of inequality in power between a less powerful individual and a more powerful other, in which both belong to the same social system. Inside organization, inequality in power is inevitable and functional. This inequality is usually formalized in leader-follower relationships. However, inequalities of power in organization are essential for control and for temporarily the law of entropy, which states that disorder will increase (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede (1991) describes Malaysian culture as relatively high in collectivism and very high in power distance and this is supported by Abdullah (1992). Correspondingly, this study reveals the truth of Hofstede findings, in which the findings and analysis explicate the phenomena in the leadership and followership life.

3.2 Followership

Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) state that from the role perspective, followers are individuals occupying a formal or informal position or rank (e.g., a “subordinate” in a hierarchical “manager–subordinate” relationship; a follower in a “leader– follower” relationship). The term follower has been controversial because it conjures up images of passive, powerless individuals who automatically do the leader's bidding. However, from the social perspective, it is essential to examine the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process. The interacting process could exhibit how the followership is enacted and how the identity is constructed because followership is seen as a relational interaction through which leadership is co-created in combined acts of leading and following. The role of the follower is to work with the leader to advance the goals, vision, and behaviours essential for both work unit and organizational success (Ibid, 2007)

Weick (1996/2001) attempts to capture what it means to be a follower. For him the follower is someone who attaches herself to the person or opinions of another, either (1) by choice (e.g. disciple, adherent) or (2) by ‘personal devotion [which] overshadows or eclipses the critical faculty’ (e.g. partisan, satellite). Looking at this understanding of followership, it is evident that Weick pictures a position that has some degree of freedom not found in the oppressed position of i.e. a slave. As such this gives followership an intrinsic characteristic, as it is not something externally forced on the individual, speaking in term of motivational psychology (Bandura, 1986).

3.2.1 Identity

Identity is viewed as stable and fixed in traditional view and can pinned down and discovered (Watson, 1996). However, recent scholars consider identity as ongoing, social construction and always emerging (Watson & Harris, 1999). For this research, two main understandings are presented. The first one is an understanding based on the personal identity seen in symbolic interactionism. The second one is looking from the social identity concept from the social psychology (Alvesson et al., 2008). Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) observes that identity as stable definitions of self that enable people to enact roles. So, in general terms, identities have meaning and stability.

In the social psychology the personal identity relates to self-esteem, self-image or other understandings of what the self consists of. The social identity is the identity created and shared by members of any social group and how individual makes sense of others (Hogg, 2006). Identity, similar to social groups is hence seen as a cognitive concept based on people’s self-concept. Based on experience, prejudices or similar, there is an expectation of how people of a certain category (age, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.) should act. What this study is trying to examine is the salience identity of the followers in the power distance culture in term of the social perception and social conduct.

3.3 How does the culture influence identity?

This section attempts to include of how culture influence follower construction. With an analysis of the cultural element as enacted, the perspective of the social context is taken into account to expand on what shapes the leader/follower relationship. The aim is to showcase how factors “outside” also influence the leader/follower relationship and hence, the follower identity. Noticeably, the leader is seen as influencing follower identity by his perceived personality and by the positioning of him as a “protector” of the team or team values. When the leader can be positioned as such a protector, one important factor for this is likely that

the followers enact according to the leaders inquest. It is shown that a follower's identity is not only created in the relationship between leader and follower(s). Not only do societal-wide influence followers, but also the immediate surroundings influence this relation. The follower identity could in general be stipulated to have a deeper cultural root or maybe even be "a fundamental human need" (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

4.0 Methodology

This is a phenomenology qualitative research that employs in-depth interview as a method to collect data. Twenty respondents have been interviewed; consist of the lower and middle level employees in the ministry of higher education, Malaysia. Respondents were selected based on purposive sampling. Each interview took between 1 – 2 hours and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Data was analysed manually following the qualitative procedures.

In phenomenology, language and speaking are regarded as important ways to gather insight into the social world and to simply understand each other (Morgan & Smircich, 1980) and the existence of contextual influences such as social norms, scripts for talking, value-laden language, expectations of both the interviewee and interviewer, able to explore identities, as actions can be described and meanings conveyed (Brynman, 2004). Both the explicit sense made and the more tacit understandings and use of language are, with some limitations, available to the interviewer which is needed for both analysing enactments and identities.

5. Findings

5.1 Power Distance (PD) and Its Effect on Followership

Global Leadership Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) research done by Hofstede in 1991 indicates that acceptance of *power distance* in Malaysia is not as extreme as suggested by Hofstede's original work. While the rating is one of the highest within the Malaysian sample, it is virtually on the median when compared to the other countries in the GLOBE sample.

Feudal structures were prevalent in pre-colonial Malay society, and the culture places considerable importance on clear recognition of status differences (Kennedy, 2002).

The following analyses are findings from the interviews using some of the distinctive Hofstede (2001) norms of high PD society:

(a) Hierarchy means existential inequality. The distribution of power is formalized in hierarchies, built through the relationships of the leader and follower.

“...now the situation is so hierarchical, so many layers...” (Respondent 4/male)

Members of high PD cultures are more likely to be accepting of, and comfortable with, structured authority relationships that involve the element of extensive exercising of power from vertical dimension.

(b) Subordinates consider superiors as being of different kind. Subordinates behave submissively and are not willing to disagree with supervisors since subordinates are afraid to express disagreement with their leaders.

“There was something that seemed not right, so I voiced it during the discussion. Then immediately after the meeting, one officer told me that I should not bring up the matter, it was improper for me to voice it upfront. Truly so, I was no longer called for another meeting after the incident, it was completely silent and they left me out of the picture” (Respondent 14/female).

In a highly stratified society where all powers are concentrated in the hands of the superior, the subordinate learns that it can be dangerous to question a decision of the superior. The phenomenon reflects the subdued interaction within which one perceives the self as part of a group while being accepting of power/status inequalities within the group (Schermerhorn & Bond, 1997).

(c) Superiors consider subordinates as being of a different kind. Subordinates are a group of people in organization perceived as an accessory to the exercise of power.

“There is just too much drama now, so much that essential aspects of the economy and country are easily lost of sight. Whenever a new minister comes into power, there are changes in policy being made. Our education has a lot of flaws and there is no doubt about that.” (Respondent 20/male)

The superior seems to enjoy his power and authority which is reflected in the frequent policy changes. The followers are rather being forced to implement as reflected by the following quotation:

“... and then the policy keeps changing, when they ... see the ministry’s focus is change, our work will change, ... sometimes abandon the previous one.” (Respondent 12/ male)

(d) Power holders are entitled to privileges.

(e)

“There was one favourite staff applied for one post. Despite the person is under qualified, such as low credential of academic achievement, less experience, this person has managed to get the job because the top management gave full supports and tried to find justifications for him. (Respondent 11/male)

In this case, the power is presumed as a gateway for leaders to make any possible decision of their favours and followers unwillingly need to accept.

(f) Power is a basic fact of society that antedates good or bad evil; its legitimacy is irrelevant. The use of power is not legitimate and is not subjected to the judgment between good and evil.

“...” many things happen is merely because of you got connection with somebody”. (Respondent 16/male)

It could be argued here that through relationship, illegitimate power was exercised, though it was sometime against the rationality.

(g) Higher ranking people are respected and feared

(h)

“often times, we are just waiting for the instructions,...it is quite obvious our fear is there...we will not do anything unless the boss direct us to do that...fear that the work is against the thinking of the boss” (Respondent 13/female)

Followers respect the elders, however, when the followers were subordinated by the higher ranking leaders, they are rather submissive, conforming and reserved to the work or things that were done without the consent of the leader (Shermerhorn & Bond, 1997).

6.0 Discussion

In power distance culture normally the relationship between the leader and the follower is situated in mechanistic type of structure. The structure is hierarchical and bureaucratic that tends to be strictly controlled, highly formalized, and standardized. Heike and Frank (2007) acknowledge that such structure limits the followers' ability to act in novel ways and provide sufficient cues to guide their behaviour.

The quotations implied by the respondents above demonstrate the boundary limit and acceptable norm in articulating his concerns and ideas. Also, they were aware that they are subjected to rules, constraints, and have limited opportunities to undertake and that legitimate setting conveys the meaning that doing the adverse is unsecured and risk taking. However, Heike and Frank (2007) note that in certain circumstances, their context is typically characterized by lower autonomy and task complexity.

It appears in this context that the bureaucratic structure defines the followers' choices and functions. As Shamir and Howell (1999) argue, the mechanistic organization is "stronger" and it underlies the psychological situations for members that they have fewer opportunities to exercise discretion and thus underrate their freedom of choice.

Within the realm of authoritative and bureaucratic nature, structurally, the top leaders have a sense of power and authority to shape their organization and making high-impact decisions, but still they are under great control externally. They are constrained by organizational regulations with mundane activities through pre-defined job processes, in which, often times involuntarily they have to do the job. Obviously, they have more limited span of discretion and are more likely to adapt their behaviours to the expectations of their superiors (Shamir & Howell, 1999). Subsuming the cultural aspect, Hofstede (2001) states that organizations of high Power Distance (PD) cultures tended to be more centralized and relied on more hierarchical levels than the organizations in low PD cultures, thus the leaders are more autocratic and directive.

Antonakis and Atwater (2002) note that hierarchical level creates 'distance' that may moderate the types of behaviours. Such distance would be in the form of psychological, structural, and functional separation, disparity, or discord between a supervisor and a subordinate (Napier & Ferris, 1993) that tend to give some impact on the job performance. Respondents also mentioned under the bureaucratic mode, the leadership focus seems to be on efficiency, and accentuate on organizing and administering activities to achieve higher or more reliable outputs. The emphasis is more on order, clear goals, and measured outputs. The nature of works is perpetual and is specified in a contract between the leaders and followers and there is a high reliance on members performing their prescribed obligations for clear rewards and inducements, and to some extent self-interests are assumed to be their main motivational force (Shamir & Howell, 1999).

The bureaucratic mode of governance leads everyone to construe the situation in the same way, induce uniform expectations regarding appropriate response patterns (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Some situations, would lead innovative ideas to die prematurely.

Shamir and Howell classify such cultural setting as non-adaptive which stress on order and efficiency and are averse to change, innovation, and risk. Therefore, they assert that this kind of culture is likely to hinder the development of transformational leadership and instead transactional leadership would prevail.

7.0 Conclusion

The context which explains the system, structures, space, values and beliefs are central to identity within this perspective. As Carsten et al. (2010) said 'To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad . . . what has meaning and importance to you and what is trivial and secondary.'

In the previous sections, it has been illuminated that the power distance culture, in the organizational context has 'uniquely' shaped and constructed the followership. The word 'unique' refer to the intertwining and complementary nature of those factors that might strategically construct the followership thinking, behaviour, characteristics and identity. The hierarchical, bureaucratic and non-autonomous organizational structure which normally becomes the features of power distance culture might be the 'iron cage' to shape the followership in this higher education context. The importance of being obedient and not making waves is highly visible. It appears in this context that the more successful people are those who are much more 'passive' (Carsten et al., 2010) in performing roles, non-confrontational, and not a risk taker, whereas the less successful people is of the assertive type of person, who have the courage to question the authority or actively disagree with the status quo. The image of conforming, accountable, and loyal is reinforced to followers by a top-down approach which is grounded in hierarchical notions and creates and maintains an identity that is defined by obedience, deference, silence, and powerlessness.

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