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Communist footprint and subordinate influence behavior in post-communist transition economies

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ABSTRACT

How does *length of exposure* to communism, the communist *footprint*, affect individuals' influence behaviors at work today? While imprinting theory has debated how exposure/lack thereof to communism—communist imprint—affects individuals, it has disregarded the exposure's length. We show that the shorter the communist footprint, the less negative professionals are toward organizationally constructive influence behaviors, and that individuals with longer communist footprints at higher-level position levels do not approve of organizationally destructive behaviors as much as their lower-level counterparts. We thus show that the continuous communist footprint provides a better understanding of work behaviors today than the dichotomous communist imprint.

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What patterns of work behavior in today's global economy can managers expect from colleagues who were socialized under communist systems in the former Soviet Union?¹ To begin, it is relevant to profile the uniqueness of the communist system, as an important episode in the history of the former Soviet Union, with regards to the work behaviors of individuals who were exposed to it and worked under its many conditions and extremes (Applebaum, 2003; Christensen, 1999). Given the oppressive, top-

controlled nature of communism (Kornai, 2000; Puffer, 1993, 1994), it was difficult for individuals within a communist system to survive and progress without becoming skillful at utilizing a range of informal influence strategies as the political elite suppressed overt personal aspirations and formal effort to achieve them as well as limiting more conventional motivational attempts to get organizational work done (Danis, Liu, & Vacek, 2011). Thus, a secret for survival and progress in the communist system was the skill subordinates had in employing informal influence tactics with their superiors that could range from organizationally constructive (pro-organizational and image management) to organizationally destructive (self-serving and maliciously intended) (Cialdini, 2006; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000; Ralston et al., 2009). Increasingly, research points “to the importance of taking account of what was left behind by communism” (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2014: 77) and learning from important prior episodes in history for a more holistic understanding of how history affects human behavior (Ahlstrom, 2014; Hunter, 2013;

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¹ We use the terms communism and socialism interchangeably in this paper, in line with prior research (e.g., Johnson, Kaufmann, McMillan, & Woodruff, 2000; Kornai, 2000).

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Peng, 2013), and how researchers can understand it better and include it in their work (Cooke, 2003; Peng, Ahlstrom, Carraher, & Shi, 2016). Hence, it is useful to analyze how individuals who were socialized during the communist era in Eastern Europe try to affect the patterns of work behavior that their managers expect from them at work today.

It is important to understand the impact that these informal influence strategies have in the workplace because, in our increasingly globalizing economy, it has become commonplace to work with colleagues who were once raised under communism in the post-communist transition economies in Central and South-Eastern Europe, or some other significantly different political-economic system. They could be colleagues who were just children or adults when the Berlin Wall fell, for example. Going beyond the basic question of how such communist-socialized professionals are likely to behave at work today, the more intriguing question becomes, will they behave similarly owing to their long exposure to communism and what do those similar behaviors include? Existing research, drawing from imprinting theory, implicitly assumes so (e.g., Danis et al., 2011). Imprinting theory suggests that entities are stamped by the external environment in which they came into existence and carry this imprint forward in life (Stinchcombe, 1965). This research proposes that communist-socialized adults did not inherit a *Tabula rasa* after communism's collapse but transitioned into the new market reality with a repertoire of communist-acquired experiences that their non-communist socialized colleagues did not inherit.

While imprinting theory has focused on the presence or absence of exposure to environments that leave imprints (Simsek, Fox, & Heavy, 2015), seldom has the heterogeneous *length of exposure* to such environments been examined for its effect (cf. Vogel, 1972). In the context of communism, imprinting theory has not yet considered that communist-socialized individuals had been exposed to communism for *varying lengths of time*, as some experienced the communist indoctrination longer than others. The question then becomes do all of these communist-socialized colleagues perceive in the same way the acceptability of different influence behaviors at work today, regardless of their varying lengths of prior communist exposure? Addressing this question is crucial for any manager working with communist-socialized subordinates as it has implications for motivating, communicating, negotiating, and collaborating with these employees (Caprar and Budean, 2013; Danis et al., 2011; Falbe and Yukl, 1992; Fu and Yukl, 2000) as well as for navigating the challenging environment in transition economies (Ahlstrom, Young, Nair, & Law, 2003; Mutlu, Zhan, Peng, & Lin, 2015).

Research laments that we still know little about how communist socialization affects professionals' current work behavior (Alas & Rees, 2006). Existing findings have also been inconclusive. Some studies have suggested that communism has conditioned people to be more cynical and mistrustful of authority and, thus, more focused on protecting their self-interests first (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2014; Uslaner & Badescu, 2004). Others have countered that communist hardships inspired people to want to personally contribute their best to their organizations after the onset of market liberalization (Hurt, Hurt-Warski, & Roux-Dufort, 2000). Still others have found that the presence or absence of the prior communist socialization ultimately had no significant effect on professionals' current perceptions of the acceptability of influence behaviors at work (Danis et al., 2011).

We clarify this debate in two ways. First, we propose that the answer depends on the professional's length of exposure to communism—the *communist footprint*. This continuous construct draws from fairness heuristic theory (van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 1997a; van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997b) to capture the varying intensities of fairness judgments about communist

authority that individuals formed depending on how short or prolonged their communist socializations were. Traditional fairness heuristic theory proposes that individuals form fairness judgments during their interactions with authority, and that judgments about earlier experiences with unjust authority carry more weight (van den Bos et al., 1997a; van den Bos et al., 1997b). As such, the communist footprint extends imprinting theory's current focus on the presence or absence of an ideological stamp from the external environment (Danis et al., 2011; Simsek et al., 2015; Stinchcombe, 1965). So far, international management studies have not analyzed how the length of communist exposure, or the length of exposure to a specific episode in a country's history (i.e., communism in our case) (Ahlstrom, 2014; Hunter, 2013; Peng, 2013), affects influence behaviors at work today. In contrast, we proposed and found that the shorter the communist footprint, the less negative professionals are toward organizationally constructive influence behavior at work today, holding all else constant, owing to these individuals' shorter experience with fending for themselves during communism. We further proposed and found that individuals with longer communist footprints at higher-level positions in their organization did not approve of organizationally destructive behaviors to the degree that individuals at lower-level positions did, owing to the former's higher sense of paternalistic responsibility toward their subordinates and organizations.

Hence, our first intended theoretical contribution is to extend the existing discrete perspective of imprinting theory with a new, process approach that explicitly integrates the effect of an individual's *length of exposure* to communism through the concept of the communist footprint. Specifically, we suggest that the communist footprint has a direct effect on influence behaviors at work today. The length of exposure time is a core component of any process, as it seeks to link past experiences with current behavior (Coraiola, Foster, & Suddaby, 2015; Lane, 2014; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2014). A process perspective allows differentiating between different intensities of communist indoctrination based on the length of the communist footprint. Similar to developing a photograph in a chemical solution, a longer communist footprint reflects, by definition, a stronger intensity of communist indoctrination. Conversely, the shorter the photograph stays exposed to the chemical solution, the less intense the image becomes, reflecting a weaker intensity of indoctrination into the communist system and its mores.

Second, we further extend imprinting theory by answering recent calls in the literature for a more nuanced understanding of whether initial imprints are weaker for some individuals than for others (Simsek et al., 2015), and if so, under what conditions. We take this call for research a step further and analyze whether the communist footprint is stronger for some individuals than for others, and if so, under what contextual conditions. By contextual conditions we mean "situational opportunities for, and countervailing constraints against, organizational behavior" (Johns, 2006: 387). We thus analyze how contextual variables may modify the relationship between the communist footprint and influence behaviors employed by the former employees under the communist system. Recent extensions to fairness heuristic theory have noted that fairness judgments can be weaker under some contextual conditions than under others. This is because ethical decision-making depends on individual factors, situational factors (Bobocel, 2013; Jones & Skarlicki, 2013; Kuratko & Goldsby, 2004), and their interplay as "memory interacts with present circumstances" to further shape human behavior (Fortin, Cojuharenco, Patient, & German, 2014: 14). The key individual factor in our study is the individual's communist footprint. A key contextual condition for any working individual is their position level in the company: lower-level positions (non-supervisory staff and first-level managers) or higher-level positions (middle- and upper-level

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