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Shades of paternalistic leadership across cultures

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that Paternalistic Leadership (PL), an emerging non-western theory, is endorsed in high power distance and collectivistic societies. However, the ambiguous nature of PL calls for a better understanding of its endorsement across cultures. Based on GLOBE's project data from 59 societies, we examine PL acceptance around the world. Our findings suggest that PL is not universally nor homogeneously endorsed, but that different patterns of endorsement give rise to idiosyncratic shades of PL across cultures. Specifically, among the 22 societies that endorse some form of paternalism, our results allowed us to distinguish between Benevolent and Exploitative PL.

1. Introduction

Management and leadership scholars have frequently discussed whether leadership is culturally specific or whether it can be generalized across cultures (Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, Dastmalchian, & House, 2012; Lee, Scandura, & Sharif, 2014). Receiving growing interest from organizational researchers, paternalistic leadership (PL), defined as a leadership “style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence” (Farh & Cheng, 2000: 91), may reflect this emic vs. etic discussion (e.g., Aycan, Schyns, Sun, Felfe, & Saher, 2013; Chou, Sibley, Liu, Lin, & Cheng, 2015; Chan, 2014; Cheng et al., 2014; Jackson, 2016; Zhang, Huai, & Xie, 2015). Being a non-western leadership approach, paternalistic leadership has the potential to augment and enrich global knowledge of leadership behaviors (Li, Leung, Chen, & Luo, 2012), either by its relational and harmonious approach, known to humanize the workplace (Aycan, 2006), or by its authoritarian behaviors, which have been shown to effectively facilitate the achievement of organizational objectives in challenging and resource-strained environments (Huang, Xu, Chiu, Lam, & Farh, 2015).

While some researchers focus on understanding paternalistic leadership from the perspective of cultural insiders (e.g., Farh & Cheng, 2000), others seek convergences and divergences across cultures (e.g., Aycan et al., 2013). The dominant approach, however, has assumed that the endorsement of PL is culturally bounded (Aycan, 2006; Farh & Cheng, 2000) and that cultural context determines its meaning (Aycan, 2006). While PL is considered to be highly endorsed in traditional, hierarchical and collectivistic ‘eastern’ cultures such as Asia, Latin America or the Middle East, it is perceived negatively in

egalitarian, industrialized and individualistic ‘western’ cultures, where it is described as “benevolent dictatorship” that leads to “non-coercive exploitation” (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). This distinction arises from the different perceptions of the ‘duality of control and care’, seen by western scholars as autonomy-constraining and suspicious on its benevolent intent (Aycan, 2006; Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008).

Notwithstanding, recent empirical studies comparing paternalistic leadership in eastern and western societies have not always supported this distinction (e.g., Pellegrini, Scandura, & Jayaraman, 2010). The overall mixed support of PL effectiveness across cultures is likely to be due to the limited number of comparative studies across multiple and diverse societies, the divergences on its operationalization, but more importantly because empirical studies have not been taking into account the different forms that PL can assume (Aycan, 2006; Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). While some studies have relied on an aggregated measure of PL (e.g., Pellegrini et al., 2010), others have examined PL dimensions independently, analyzing the effects of each one on a series of outcomes (e.g., Chen & Kao, 2009; Chen et al., 2014; Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2014).

However, what defines paternalism is the combination of its key dimensions, meaning that control and care must coexist (e.g., high benevolence without authority cannot be considered paternalism). In light of this coexistence, Aycan (2006) distinguishes Benevolent from Exploitative Paternalism based on leaders' behaviors and their underlying intent. Benevolent leaders show generosity and genuine care towards subordinates, who, in turn, reciprocate with loyalty and respect. Conversely, exploitative leaders use their authority to control decision-making with a focus on organizational outcomes, using rewards and

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punishments to make subordinates comply and obey. Exploring these distinct shades of PL across societies may help to reconcile the inconsistent findings of previous studies and to understand PL acceptance by different cultures.

Given this context of paternalistic leadership research and cultural contingencies, we raise the following questions: is paternalistic leadership culturally bounded, or can it be generalized across cultures? Do distinct societies endorse the dimensions of paternalistic leadership differently? Do these differences give rise to distinctive shades of paternalistic leadership? Can these distinctive shades be explained by societal cultural values? To address the above questions and to expand the understanding of PL, we examine the generalizability of paternalistic leadership dimensions using data from the GLOBE project and compare these dimensions across societies. GLOBE project should be of particular interest, as it includes data from societies in nearly all parts of the world (Dorfman et al., 2012).

Overall, this study contributes to the PL literature in three major ways. First, we improve the understanding of the endorsement of PL dimensions in a broad range of contrasting societies. Second, by examining similarities and differences among societies and mapping the distribution and prevalence of the combination of PL dimensions, we provide evidence of the levels of endorsement and, ultimately, of paternalistic leadership “shades” around the world. Third, we shed light on the societal values that may be responsible for these different shades of PL. From a practical perspective, our study may help practitioners to prepare for expatriate assignments by familiarizing them with culturally specific leadership schemas and may also help policy makers by shedding light on ideal paternalistic practices that could be adopted by nations worldwide.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Paternalistic leadership construct

In the context of leadership, paternalism is usually referred as a leadership style that combines fatherly benevolence and authoritarianism (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Paternalistic leaders show individualized consideration and care while at the same time they control and centralize decision-making (Martinez, 2003). Sinha (1990) suggests that paternalistic leaders meet the ‘twin requirements’ of compliance and harmony, such that the coexistence of benevolence and authority stems from the father figure, who is nurturing, caring, and dependable, as well as authoritative, demanding and disciplinarian. Followers, in return, are expected to be loyal and deferent to their leaders in exchange for concern and resources.

In an attempt to delineate the domain of paternalistic leadership, Farh, Cheng, and colleagues (Cheng, Chou, & Farh, 2000; Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000; Farh, Cheng, Chou, & Chu, 2006) and Aycan (2006) have developed two seminal frameworks of PL that share several fundamental similarities with a few conceptual distinctions. Farh and Cheng (2000) defined paternalistic leadership as a style that combined strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence and moral integrity. Their operationalization of PL combines three distinct dimensions: authoritarianism, benevolence, and morality. Each dimension is measured as an independent leadership style, each linked to a specific response by subordinates (Cheng et al., 2000, 2004), and it is widely used among PL researchers. Differently, based on role theories of leadership, Aycan (2006) defined PL as a hierarchical superior-subordinate relationship, where leaders provide care, protection and guidance to subordinates in both work and non-work domains, who in turn are expected to be loyal and deferent to the leader. Aycan (2006) argued that, what differentiates paternalistic leadership from other leadership constructs is the creation of a familiar environment through the involvement in both work and non-work lives of subordinates which leads to an expectation of loyalty in return (Aycan et al., 2013).

Although Aycan’s (2006) and Farh and Cheng’s (2000) models do not completely converge, they help us to identify the core characteristics of paternalistic leadership. Both models focus on the role of a leader’s authority in the hierarchical relationship between leader and followers. Paternalistic leaders use their authority to control and centralize decision-making, demanding obedience from subordinates (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Yet, Farh and Cheng (2000) stress that paternalistic leaders do not abuse authority for personal gain and are exemplar in his or her personal and work conduct, being able to assume a counseling role for their followers, both professionally and personally. Similarly, Aycan (2006) highlights that paternalism is not equal to authoritarianism, suggesting that while authoritarian leaders primarily rely on control and exploitation as a way to make subordinates dependent and compliant, paternalistic leaders use their control coupled with care and nurturance, getting loyalty and deference in return.

This nurturing facet present in both models highlights benevolence as a key component of paternalistic leadership, thus establishing a duality between control and care. In other words, at the same time that paternalistic leaders use their status, hierarchy and power to influence followers, they also are involved with, care for, and protect them. Farh and Cheng (2000) and Aycan (2006) both argue that paternalistic leaders demonstrate individualized, holistic concern for their subordinates’ professional, personal and familial well-being, emphasizing an understanding of their emotions and needs. They help followers by providing multiple resources (attention, time, money, etc.), enabling the establishment of a proximal relationship and interpersonal acceptance. The frameworks also stress that subordinates should feel grateful and obligated to reciprocate their leader’s individualized consideration (Aycan, 2006; Farh et al., 2006).

Despite the existence of a common essence grounded in the centrality of authority and benevolence, these frameworks adopt different assumptions regarding the nature of leadership. While Cheng and colleagues (Cheng et al., 2000; Farh & Cheng, 2000) propose a ‘value-laden’ framework, portraying PL in positive terms, Aycan’s (2006) framework portrays it in neutral terms (Aycan, 2015). From one hand, the conceptualization of Cheng et al. (2000) assume that the leader is benevolent and moral, reflecting a limited view of PL that is context-specific (rooted in Confucianism, familialism, patriarchalism). Differently, Aycan (2006) focus on the role expectations in the relationship between superior and subordinate, conceptualizing paternalistic leadership more neutrally. A neutral definition captures the concept of paternalism without forcing the conclusion that any instance of paternalism is morally wrong or right (Bullock, 2015). As empirical research has found PL to be associated with negative behaviors at work (e.g., Soyulu, 2011), remaining neutral on the moral acceptability of paternalism may allow a better understanding of its complexity and mixed effects on organizational outcomes.

Building on this value-neutral definition, Aycan (2006) further clarified the ‘duality between control and care’ inherent in paternalism, distinguishing two types of PL: Benevolent and Exploitative Paternalism. Aycan (2006) suggests that the difference between these two types of PL lies on the underlying motifs behind leaders’ care and subordinates’ loyalty. In other words, leaders show care as a primary behavior and exercise the use of control according to their intent, which can be sincere or self-serving. In Benevolent Paternalism, the leader genuinely cares about subordinates’ general well-being, exercising the use of control to maintain order and harmonious relationships (Aycan, 2006). This “parental tenderness” (Hayek, Novicevic, Humphreys, & Jones, 2010) is coupled with moderate authority and command to guarantee social control (e.g., Humphreys, Randolph-Seng, Haden, & Novicevic, 2015).

Conversely, in Exploitative Paternalism, leader’s care is a mean to achieve organizational goals. They offer protection and care so they can demand more from workers (Brumley, 2014). The care that exploitative leaders exhibit is egoistic in nature and is provided solely to elicit employees’ compliance, who conform because of the fear of being

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