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Moderating role of subordinates' attitudes on transformational leadership and effectiveness: A multi-cultural and multi-level perspective [☆]

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ABSTRACT

We conducted the current multi-cultural, multi-level study with three objectives in mind. First, we examined the association of transformational leadership and leader effectiveness across two different cultures, the United States (U.S.) and Korea, with three followers' attitudes toward their leader (trust in the leader, loyalty, and value congruence) as moderators of this association. Second, we conceptualized followers' collectivistic orientation as a personal value, regardless of their nationality, and tested its moderating effect on the leadership–effectiveness association. Finally, we employed a multi-level approach throughout to examine whether transformational leadership processes, and in contrast individualized leadership, operated at different levels of analysis across different countries. Results from WABA and regression analyses indicated that transformational leadership operated at the individual level of analysis in both samples and was effective across different cultures. Specifically, followers' attitudes served as moderators of the transformational leadership–effectiveness association only in the U.S. sample, while collectivistic orientation had a significant moderating effect in both samples. Results from WABA also indicated that individualized leadership operated at the dyadic level for the U.S. sample and at the individual level for the Korean sample. Several theoretical and practical implications of the results are discussed.

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Since Bass' seminal book on transformational leadership was published in 1985, a number of researchers have begun studying this particular leadership model, and it has emerged as perhaps the most frequently researched topic in leadership during the last two decades (see Avolio, Sosik, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Avolio & Yammarino, 2002; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). Recently, the popularity of studying transformational leadership has been increased even more by many corporate scandals in the U.S., which have made people become aware of the importance of ethics and authenticity in leadership processes (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005). Many researchers and practitioners consider transformational leaders well suited for an era in which chief executives should take into account moral and ethical implications of their business-related decisions.

One distinctive characteristic that differentiates transformational leadership from other leadership approaches is its active involvement with and engagement of personal values among followers. According to Bass (1985), transactional leaders motivate followers based on an existing set of personal values and provide rewards that are attractive to their current value framework, while transformational leaders actively seek to change personal values among followers so that they can go beyond their self-interest for the good of larger entities such as the group and organization. The value realignment process often times allows

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followers to equate their own success with that of their organization, and thus the effect of transformational leadership on follower motivation is stronger and more sustainable (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Shamir & Howell, 1999). Employing a similar theoretical framework, Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990) also pointed out a transformational leader's active involvement in changing followers' values so that followers are encouraged to accept group goals and work together toward a common goal and shared vision.

Given these theoretical premises of the transformational leadership approach, several researchers have identified important attitudinal constructs through which transformational leaders motivate followers and increase their performance. These constructs include followers' trust in the leader, value congruence, positive affect, and commitment, to name just a few (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Past research showed that these constructs displayed not only the immediate or direct effects of transformational leadership on followers, but also are important mediators and/or moderators of the transformational leadership process (Jung & Avolio, 2000; Podsakoff et al., 1990). For example, transformational leadership is known to increase followers' trust, realign followers' personal values and make them consistent with their leader's espoused values, and create a sense of reverence, loyalty, and respect (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000).

Given the above ideas, the current study had three meso or multi-level objectives (e.g., Hunt, 1991). First, based on the existing transformational and charismatic leadership literature (see Avolio & Yammarino, 2002, for a review), at the individual level of analysis, we selected three important follower attitudes that could be both immediate outcomes of transformational leadership and important moderators of leadership–effectiveness relationships for investigation. These attitudes were trust, value congruence, and loyalty. Although there are several additional variables which might moderate the relationship between transformational leadership and its effect on work outcomes, researchers have argued that these three variables represent some of the most important follower attitudes through which the effect of transformational leadership is either enhanced or diminished (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Jung & Avolio, 1999; Podsakoff et al., 1990). Past research has not examined these three important moderators of transformational leadership in a single research investigation.

Second, also at the individual level of analysis, we used followers' collectivistic orientation as a personal value, regardless of their nationality, and tested its moderating effect on the transformational leadership–effectiveness relationship. Collectivistic orientation refers to the degree to which individuals emphasize responsibility to groups and organizations (Triandis, 1995). Several researchers have examined collectivistic orientation at the individual level in the past because people tend to hold a wide range of values toward a collective entity to which they belong even within the same culture (Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1995). As such, the terms “idocentrism” and allocentrism” have been developed to describe an individual's orientation toward a collective entity (Triandis, 1995). Supporting this notion, Walumbwa, Lawler and Avolio (2007) recently found that the individual-level construct, allocentrism, moderated transformational leadership processes in such a way that allocentric followers reacted more positively when they perceived their leader being transformational. Therefore, from a multi-level perspective, we were interested in determining whether in fact these effects did operate at the individual level and not at higher (collective) levels of analysis.

Finally, we employed a multi-cultural, multi-level approach to examine whether transformational leadership processes, in contrast to individualized leadership (Dansereau et al., 1995; Mumford, Dansereau, & Yammarino, 2000; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2002; Yammarino et al., 2005), operated at different levels of analysis across different countries and cultures. Individualized leadership focuses on differences between individuals, regardless of whether they are superiors or subordinates, who form a unique relationship with one individual that is independent of the relationships they form with other individuals in a group or team (Dansereau et al., 1995). We chose the contrast with this alternative theoretical approach, which has been shown empirically to operate at a higher (dyad) level of analysis in the U.S. culture and asserted to operate at a still higher (group) level in Asian cultures, as a way to enhance the strength of our transformational leadership results; i.e., we know more about what something “is” by knowing more about what it “is not”.

In particular, the individual and country levels of analysis are two different levels used in the conceptualization and testing of the transformational leadership processes of focus here. The higher level of analysis (country), the context (see Hunt, 1991; Yammarino et al., 2005), is conceptualized and tested as a moderator of lower level of analysis (individual) effects. Beyond these, an additional theory (individualized leadership) and another level of analysis (dyad) are introduced and tested as alternative mechanisms for understanding superior–subordinate relationships; and these effects are tested further under yet a higher level of analysis (country) for moderation. Moreover, in all instances, since individuals and dyads are embedded in groups, this level of analysis is also considered conceptually and empirically. By considering these multiple alternatives in terms of theories and levels of analysis, and ruling them out (along with ruling out mediation effects; see below), we are better able to understand the meso and multi-level phenomena of interest (see Hunt, 1991; Hunt & Ropo, 1998; Osborn & Hunt, 2007; Yammarino et al., 2005; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008). We also conducted our study to respond to recent calls by several scholars (see Hunt, 1991, 2004; Johns, 2006; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006; Yammarino et al., 2005) for paying greater attention to the role of context, a higher level of analysis, that affects leadership and management processes. As such, key foci of this study are its multi-cultural, multi-level, and meso nature. We provide our theoretical background and present several hypotheses for testing in the following section.

1. Theoretical background and hypotheses

1.1. Direct effect of transformational leadership on effectiveness across two cultures

The positive effect that transformational leadership has on various outcomes at individual, dyad, group, and organization levels has been well-documented (see Avolio & Yammarino, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Yammarino, Dubinsky, Comer, Jolson, 1997;

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