Resistance to Deficient Organizational Authority: The Impact of Culture and Connectedness in the Workplace

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In 2 countries differing on individualistic–collectivistic orientation, we investigated resistance to a request made by a manager perceived as lacking personal power based on a key attribute (e.g., expertise, relationality). Results of an experiment with Polish and American participants were consistent with cultural differences in the preferred attribute of leaders in the 2 nations. Participants were more resistant to a manager who lacked the attribute more valued in their culture: Americans were more resistant to managers perceived as lacking in expertise, whereas Poles were more resistant to managers perceived as lacking in relational skills. This effect occurred only under conditions of well-established workplace relationships, suggesting that group connectedness creates a tendency to behave in line with predominant cultural norms.

There is a long, rich history of theory and research regarding effective social influence approaches within organizations (Ayman 2002, 2004; Hirokawa & Wagner, 2004; Koslowsky, Schwartzwald, & Ashuri, 2001; Rahim & Buntzman, 1988; Raven, 1965; Raven, Schwartzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998; Schwartzwald, Koslowsky, & Agassi, 2001; Yukl, 1994; Yukl & Tracy, 1992). However, even though rapid globalization and the accompanying growth of international business have helped fuel an interest in cross-cultural organizational research (Auer-Rizzi, Szabo, & Innreiter-Moser, 2002; Ayman, 1993, 2004; Smith, Wang & Leung, 1997), more data are necessary to understand how effective organizational influence occurs in different cultures.
In an attempt to provide this information, we sought to investigate one fundamental source of organizational influence that is generated by managerial authority in a pair of cultures (United States and Poland), whose members differ in the extent to which they value competence versus relational harmony. Moreover, we probed not to examine the level of compliance with properly exercised managerial authority (which is typically the focus of such studies), but to study noncompliance with deficiently exercised authority. More specifically, we set out to build on the emerging research on resistance to authority (Sachau, Houlihan, & Gilbertson, 1999; Sagarin, Cialdini, Rice, & Serna, 2002) by looking at how a deficiency in a supervisor’s specific type of personal power can lead to employee resistance to that manager’s request.

Before describing our investigation in detail, it is necessary to explicate two crucial distinctions pertaining to authority’s influence. The first refers to types of authority—specifically to the differences between expert versus relational leaders as they are perceived by employees—and to possible preferences for those types of leaders in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures. The second considers the regulatory power of cultural norms as they are or are not activated by members’ depth of connectedness to the group.

Expert and Relational Authorities in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

The distinction between expert and relational leaders dates back to Bales’ (1958) classic research looking at the behaviors of task-oriented leaders (i.e., using expertise to lead the group successfully) versus socioemotional managers (i.e., referring to relational skills while leading the group). This important dichotomy appears in numerous conceptualizations under various labels for authority, such as work-facilitative versus supportive leaders (Bowers & Seashore, 1966); production-centered versus employee-centered leaders (Likert, 1967); or goal-achievement- versus group-maintenance-oriented leaders (Cartwright & Zander, 1968).

More recently, Tyler (1997) proposed a similar taxonomy of types of organizational authorities, including instrumental (stemming from the skillful management of resources) and relational (resulting from efficient interactions with others). All of these approaches to leadership assume that managers affect employees by referring to two basic sources of power that are reflected in managers’ primary concern for task or for employees. Leadership effectiveness is determined here by the dynamics of the balance between these two factors. This, in turn, depends on various situational conditions. One of the most important is the degree of connectedness in the workgroups.

This expert versus relational distinction has also been examined cross-culturally in nations and individuals that differ in their individualistic and
collectivistic value systems (De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Wojciszke, 1997). Research and theory has suggested that both individuals and cultures that may prefer either an individualistic or a collectivistic value system can also be expected to show somewhat greater preferences for expert versus relational leaders, respectively. For example, persons with individualistic value orientations tend to search primarily for competence information when forming impressions of others (De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000), whereas people with collectivistic value orientations tend to focus primarily on information concerning morality/relationality (Wojciszke, 1997).

Ayman (2004) suggested that in order to motivate employees, leaders in some cultures must first show their competence; while in other cultures, such an approach would be considered unacceptable. Since people in individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in the extent to which they value different attributes in an authority, we might expect that in both types of cultures, employees would be more resistant to an authority deficient in culturally valued characteristics.

In her seminal review of concepts, methodologies, and research on leadership in the cultural context, Ayman (2004) proposed an analogous distinction, which she labeled as consideration (i.e., behaving in a friendly manner, open to input, respectful of others) versus initiating structure (i.e., getting the job done, planning). These approaches reflect separate sources of power that, when properly combined, enhance the accomplishment of organizational goals. Therefore, the evident lack of one or another might evoke negative responses in employees. As Zaccaro (1998) speculated, the possible lack of one or another may trigger different outcomes depending on additional factors (see also Ayman, 2002). One of these complicating factors may be employee connectedness within his or her workgroup, which can make the group’s norms more salient.

Employee Connectedness in the Workgroup and Compliance

Group cohesiveness as a factor determining performance level came to prominence in organizational research with a classic study by Seashore (1954), who demonstrated that performance is better not only in highly cohesive groups, but also in low cohesive groups if group members perceive support from the organization. In this approach, cohesion referred to the management–employee relationship. Most notably, Fiedler’s (1978) contingency model proposed emphasizing the leader–employee relationship.

Group cohesion in the workplace may also be perceived as a depth of bond within team members (Ayman, 2002). It is this latter conception of group cohesion—that is, as a bond among team members—that we wish to
examine. In particular, we are interested in the effect of group cohesion on possible resistance to specific types of managers’ behaviors.

Considerable research has demonstrated that when people receive requests from a legitimately constituted authority, they often comply, even in a direction they would not prefer (Blass, 1999; Hofling, Brotzman, Dalrymple, Graves, & Pierce, 1966; Krackow & Blass, 1995; Milgram, 1974). A factor that has been shown to affect organizational leaders’ effectiveness is the quality of relationships between employees and the manager (for a review, see Gerstner & Day, 1997; see also Tzine & Vardi, 1982). However, none of these studies (or any other of which we are aware) examined how employees’ relationships with coworkers impact their resistance to an organizational authority. To the extent that one feels connected to a group, influence from within the group may be powerful enough to counteract tendencies toward deference to authority (Schriesheim, 1980; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; van Knippenberg, 2000).

According to self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987; Terry, Hogg, & White, 2000), the most potent effect of salient group membership manifests itself in rendering behaviors more congruent with the likely norms and prototypical behavioral characteristics of the group. Support for this contention comes from evidence that group membership leads members to respond as a prototypical group member would (Levine & Moreland, 1998; van Knippenberg, 2000). Thus, if group membership activates conformity with the likely group norms and ideals, culturally prototypical responding in the workplace should occur principally when workgroup connectedness is high. As Ayman (1993, 2002) has speculated, employees from different cultures may use their culturally based schemas and scripts when responding to leaders. One set of these scripts and schemas may be rooted in the culturally based individualistic versus collectivistic orientations of employees.

Research Overview

In order to examine resistance to managerial authority, we constructed an experiment in which university students in Poland and in the United States indicated the extent to which they would comply with a supervisor’s request to support an initiative that they felt would be wrongheaded. It might be argued that the aggressive entrance of a market economy and Western customs into Poland would blunt effects attributable to national differences in individualistic versus collectivistic value orientation. However, Reykowski and colleagues (Reykowski, 1994; Reykowski & Smolenska, 1993) have argued that these influences have produced only superficial changes that so far have not much affected deep-seated traditional collectivistic values.
Consequently, Poland still scores in the lower to average range on measures of individualism (Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998) and in the middle to upper range of collectivism (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999; Hofstede, 2001; Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998).

We varied whether the supervisor was deficient in expert or relational qualities. Moreover, we manipulated whether participants had a high or a low degree of connectedness with their workplace colleagues. That is, participants were either told to suppose that they had many or few personal relationships and contacts with their workmates. We propose the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Resistance will be greater in Poland to a manager who is deficient in relational (vs. expert) qualities of leadership; while resistance will be greater in the U.S. to a manager who is deficient in expert (vs. relational) qualities of leadership.

Such a potential outcome would support the assumption that traditional differences in individualistic versus collectivistic orientations of the two countries (Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998) would incline Polish participants to be more resistant to managers who violate the cultural value for relationality and would incline U.S. participants to be more resistant to managers who fail to meet the cultural value for expertise. Hence, the outcome would manifest itself as a two-way interaction between nation and type of managerial deficiency. According to this set of assumptions, degree of connectedness with one's workgroup should not affect the expected pattern. We propose the following:

**Hypothesis 2.** Poles will show greater resistance to a relationally deficient manager, whereas Americans will show greater resistance to an expertise-deficient manager. This pattern will occur principally among employees who have a high degree of workgroup connectedness.

If this pattern of results occurs, it would support the assumption that high workgroup connectedness should stimulate tendencies to conform to the group norms and preferences most relevant to the culture. In a traditionally more collectivistic country (e.g., Poland), these norms and preferences would favor relationality, generating greater resistance to a leader who is deficient in this regard. In a largely individualistic nation (e.g., the U.S.), these norms and ideals would favor expertise, generating greater resistance to a leader who is deficient in this respect. This outcome would manifest itself as a three-way interaction of nation, type of managerial deficiency, and degree of workgroup connectedness.
Method

Study participants consisted of undergraduate psychology students from two countries: 160 from Poland (42 male, 118 female) and 163 from the U.S. (46 male, 117 female). The sample consisted heavily of evening and weekend students. Consequently, the great majority of participants from both countries had previous employment experience involving at least one workplace manager. The Polish translation of the American version of the material was retranslated back to English by a bilingual speaker and was matched for adequacy (Brislin, 1970). However, it did not require any substantial adjustments.

To test the amount of reported resistance in response to a manager’s request, we used a typical arrangement employed in previous research on compliance in organizations (e.g., Koslowsky et al., 2001; Raven et al., 1998). Participants were first presented with a specific organizational situation that concludes with a manager making a request that conflicts with the employee’s personal opinion. Participants were then asked to indicate their likelihood of compliance with the manager’s request. We chose a request as an influence strategy for its relatively neutral, noncoercive position in the work environment across cultures. In the classification of influence tactics, it would combine elements of rational persuasion (using logical arguments) and consultation (asking to participate in planning a change; Falbe & Yukl, 1992; Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990; Yukl & Tracy, 1992).

To test our hypotheses, we employed a between-subjects, 2 (Nation: U.S. or Poland) × 2 (Type of Managerial Deficiency: expertise-deficient vs. relationally deficient) × 2 (Degree of Workgroup Connectedness: high vs. low) design. Our key dependent variable is reported willingness to comply or not comply with the manager’s request. To manipulate these factors, we used the following scenario, in which brackets and italics denote phrasing in two different conditions:

Imagine that 2 to 3 months ago you started working for a firm in a lower management position. [Low degree of connectedness: Because you are new, you haven’t yet established] [High degree of connectedness: Even though you are new, you have already established] very many personal relationships and contacts in the workplace with other employees.

Your firm is considering a new program of managerial training for many current managers, including you. As is traditional for your firm, whenever a change of this sort is proposed, those managers who will be directly affected are asked to give their opinions about the proposed program. This program will be
quite time consuming and, in your opinion, it would not be worth the effort it will require. You will be asked to give your vote on this matter anonymously so that no one can know how you voted. Your immediate boss, Mr. Keller, has made it clear in a departmental memo that he would like this new training program to go forward. Thus, he has asked you and your fellow managers to support it in your votes.

[Expertise-deficient manager: When making this decision, take into account that your boss is concerned with his employees’ well-being and with maintaining harmonious relationships with them; however, he has limited expertise in his field and is not that good at achieving organizational goals.]

[Relationally deficient manager: When making this decision, take into account that your boss has high expertise in his field and is good at achieving organizational goals; however, he is not that concerned with his employees’ well-being or with maintaining harmonious relationships with them.]

Participants were asked to indicate their willingness to comply with their manager’s request. They responded to the statement “The likelihood that you will follow your boss’s wish and vote in favor of this new program is . . .” on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 (very low likelihood) to 8 (very high likelihood).

Results

Our preliminary analyses indicate a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 306) = 9.18, p = .003$, with males showing a higher likelihood of complying. Because gender did not interact with any other variables, we included gender as a covariate in the analyses. Additionally, we observed a marginal main effect of nation, $F(1, 306) = 3.63, p = .058$, showing that Polish participants indicated a somewhat higher level of overall compliance. The relevant means for our two demographic variables were 3.91 (males) and 3.22 (females) and 4.19 (males) and 3.64 (females) in the United States and Poland, respectively.

Support for Hypothesis 1

The first possible outcome was that resistance in each country would be greater to the type of manager who lacked the more culturally valued leadership attribute of that nation. Statistical support for this outcome would occur as a two-way interaction between nation and type of managerial
deficiency across the two workgroup connectedness conditions. However, our results show that this interaction was not significant, $F(1, 306) = 0.81, p = .369$ (see Table 1).

Support for Hypothesis 2

The second possible outcome was that the phenomenon of greater resistance to the manager who lacked the culturally valued leadership behaviors would appear principally when the employees had a high degree of workgroup connectedness. Statistical support for this outcome would be indicated by the joint presence of a three-way interaction among nation, type of managerial deficiency, and workgroup connectedness; and a two-way interaction between nation and type of managerial deficiency in the established workgroup connectedness condition. Both of these interactions proved significant, $F(2, 306) = 4.98, p = .007$; and $F(1, 151) = 7.35, p = .007$, respectively (see Figure 1).

As would be expected, analyses of simple effects in the high workgroup connectedness condition indicate that the U.S. participants showed more resistance to an expertise-deficient authority than to a relationally deficient manager, $F(1, 75) = 4.00, p = .049$; whereas in Poland, participants indicated marginally more resistance to a relationally deficient authority than to an expertise-deficient manager, $F(1, 76) = 3.37, p = .070$. In the low connectedness condition, on the other hand, there was a marginally significant two-way

### Table 1

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<th>Authority deficiency</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Poland</th>
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<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
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<td>Low connectedness</td>
<td>3.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>High connectedness</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>.337</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low connectedness</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.263</td>
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<tr>
<td>High connectedness</td>
<td>3.84</td>
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*Note. Higher mean values indicate greater willingness to comply with supervisor’s wishes.*
interaction between nation and type of managerial deficiency, displaying a pattern opposite to the one in the high connectedness condition, $F(1, 555) = 2.86, p = .093$. The simple effects of the type of managerial deficiency in this condition, however, were not significant for either the U.S., $F(1, 79) = 1.44, p = .234$; or Poland, $F(1, 76) = 1.42, p = .237$. Thus, a lack of culturally valued qualities in the manager produced greater resistance only in the high connectedness condition.

**Discussion**

This study examined employee resistance to expertise-deficient and relationally deficient authorities in the predominantly individualistic culture of the U.S. and the traditionally more collectivistic culture of Poland. After reviewing the relevant literature, we had reason to believe that two different outcomes were viable. First, because collectivists tend to value more relationality, while for individualists expertise and competence take priority, one possibility was that these cultural preferences would stimulate different patterns of resistance to deficient authorities in the U.S. and Poland. Second, it was also plausible that this relative difference in noncompliance would be
qualified by the degree of employees’ connectedness within their workgroup, such that high group connectedness would increase the salience and impact of dominant cultural norms.

Our results indicate that Poles and Americans did, indeed, differ in their levels of projected resistance against authorities deficient in personal power reflected in either expertise or relationality. As could be predicted from cultural preferences related to prevailing value orientations, Poles felt more resistant to a manager who was deficient in relationality, whereas Americans felt more resistant to a manager who lacked expertise. Thus, people in each country felt less willing to comply with a request from an authority who lacked the attributes that are considered more important for leaders in that culture.

These findings suggest that a Polish employee working in the U.S. may not resist the manager’s style of relational deficiency, but if the same behavior were exerted by the manager in Poland, the manager would face more resistance. However, this cultural difference appears to work only in groups with a cohesive bond. This tendency was found in our research only in the context of well-established connections with other workgroup members. That is, employees were more resistant to an authority who lacked the culturally valued trait only when they perceived many established connections to other workgroup members. Without a context of well-established connections to the organizational in-group, participants showed no differences in their relative resistance to either type of authority in either country.

*Study Limitations*

A limitation of the present study is one that is true of many cross-cultural investigations. The effects we attributed to variations in the individualistic versus collectivistic value orientations of our American and Polish participants could have been a result of other differences between the two countries. Nonetheless, we can think of no other previously recorded difference between Poland and the U.S. that could explain the pattern of results we found. Perhaps the best candidate in this regard would be that of power distance, which has been found to differ between the two nations, with Poles showing higher levels of the construct (Hofstede, 2001; Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998). However, based on variations in power distance, one would only expect differences in the amount of resistance to authority, not the more complex differences in resistance to specifically deficient authorities that can be predicted from variations in individualism–collectivism. Nevertheless, we cannot draw an entirely confident conclusion that individualism–collectivism is the only mediator of effects found in our research.
A second limitation of the present research is that the results are based on a scenario design that employed university students. However, this methodology has been shown to be effective in similar research (Koslowsky et al., 2001; Raven et al., 1998). Moreover, our experimental participants were not naïve with regard to workplace issues, as the great majority of students at both universities had prior or current employment experience. Nonetheless, future research should examine these phenomena in field settings and in other cross-cultural environments.

A final limitation is that, in our study, the manager and employees were both from the same culture. However, trends toward globalization and the emergence of multinational organizations increase the likelihood that a manager may come from a different culture than that of his or her employees. Future research is needed to examine how such a state of affairs will affect resistance to managers who possess certain leadership deficiencies. Yet, it is risky to generalize from same-culture to cross-culture interactions (Ayman, 2004). In all, we believe that despite the mentioned limitations, the present study provides an important and insightful inquiry toward better understanding of resistance to deficient authorities in a cross-cultural context.

**Theoretical Implications**

Despite the rapid shifts toward a market economy in central and eastern European countries, including Poland, numerous researchers have indicated that so far such changes have had a relatively limited impact on traditional collectivistic values (Jago, Maczynski, & Reber, 1996; Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998; Reykowski, 1994, 1998; Schwartz & Bardi, 1997; Szabo, Jarmuz, Maczynski, & Reber, 1997). Indeed, there is emerging evidence of a tendency to resist some of the individualistic values (e.g., personal success) across the varieties of organizational settings and personal realms (Miecik, 2005). Regarding managerial styles in Poland, Maczynski (2002) proposed in a volume on psychology and globalization that the change in Polish managerial practices toward more participative leadership (Jago et al., 1996) may be stimulated by adequate training programs, which so far are not widely provided in that country.

All in all, although our results support the notion that Poland still retains some core aspects of its collectivistic identity, they also show that these traditional values may not manifest themselves under all circumstances. That is, while we did find the predicted difference between the U.S. and Poland in terms of resisting deficient authorities, this difference appeared only when group and cultural norms were made salient by the high level of workplace connectedness. When these group bonds and salient norms were relatively
absent, Poles and Americans did not show any significant differences in compliance level.

These findings fit well with evidence that group and cultural norms have little direct impact on behavior unless they are salient in consciousness (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000). Our results also fit well with contingency theories of leadership (Chemers, 1997; Fiedler, 1967), which suggest that changes in situational factors can greatly affect leadership effectiveness. In addition, as Ayman (2002) indicated, one of the crucial components of the contingency that determines leaders’ effectiveness is the match between the leaders’ characteristics and culture.

It is also worth mentioning that while the two-way interaction in the low connectedness condition was not conventionally significant \((p = .093)\), the observed pattern of results in this condition is exactly the opposite of the results in the high connectedness condition (see Figure 1). This reverse pattern may suggest that when employees feel separated from the group, they may be more likely to act in the opposite direction of the prototypical norms of the group. However, this speculation must be examined in future studies.

Our data also highlight two important theoretical points regarding factors that can lead to resistant behavior in organizations. First, it seems mistaken to think that cultural differences in leadership preferences would not affect resistance to deficient authorities. Much research has already found that the conceptions and practice of leadership are embedded in a cultural context (e.g., House & Hanges, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). Our research expands on this idea by pointing out that these preferences are important when considering resistance to deficient authorities. In fact, we specifically found that when a manager lacked an attribute that is highly valued in that particular culture, our participants became more resistant to the manager.

It is probable that this phenomenon is also relevant beyond the organizational arena. For example, this effect would likely manifest itself in any situation in which an authority who is lacking in expertise or relationality may be trying to influence a target, such as when a teacher attempts to gain the compliance of a student or a political leader seeks compliance from followers. The applicability and magnitude of the effect observed in our study across different types of social situations would be an interesting topic to examine in future studies.

Second, in keeping with social categorization theory (Terry et al., 2000; Turner et al., 1987), it seems equally mistaken to think that group members’ level of connectedness will not affect how people will resist a deficient authority. Our results highlight that a connected workplace environment—one in which people feel that they have many established relationships with their coworkers—is likely to make people more inclined to act in accord with
cultural norms. As before, this effect probably extends into other social arenas beyond the organizational realm.

**Practical Implications**

Other researchers have noted that rapid globalization creates a strong need for managers working in multinational and international organizations to be familiar with and to match their styles to local cultural values (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993). Our research supports these recommendations by showing that cultural values do affect resistance to managerial directions and initiatives. Furthermore, in order to overcome resistance from their employees, managers need to do more than take into account the specific values of the culture. They also need to be aware of the relationships among their subordinates. For instance, when dealing with a new employee, even a deficient manager may experience little resistance and be lulled into a false sense of security and efficiency. However, this lack of resistance might not be indicative of the manager's supervisory skills or actions. Indeed, noncompliance may increase as the employee establishes relationships at the workplace, even if the manager's behavior has not changed, leaving the manager bewildered as to the cause.

Finally, the increase in resistance as a result of employee connectedness will be different across cultures. More specifically, resistance in a given culture will be sensitive to the manager's leadership style. In the highly individualistic culture of the United States (Hofstede, 2001), a manager who does not demonstrate expertise may find increasing resistance from employees who become more connected to other workers. In contrast, in more collectivistic cultures, such as Poland (Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998), employees may become more resistant to a manager who does not have strong relational qualities.

Finally, these findings suggest that leaders who wish to obtain high levels of compliance from their subordinates regarding initiatives and directives should consider different influence strategies, depending on the local culture. In more individualistic cultures, people should be less likely to resist when the request or task is presented as one that would serve effectiveness goals. In collectivistic cultures, subordinates should be less likely to resist when a task is presented as one that would serve relational goals. It is important to note that this effect and the strategies to overcome it should not be limited to business settings.

As suggested previously, the same principles should apply in any organization with a semblance of a leadership hierarchy, such as political and health care organizations, nonprofit agencies, or educational settings. Moreover,
although our specific findings relate only to Poland, we believe that similar effects are also likely to be exhibited in other central and eastern European nations and world cultures with a stronger collectivistic orientation.

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