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Article

Transformational Leadership across Cultures: Follower Perception and Satisfaction

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Abstract: Leading people from diverse cultures is centrally important in organizations. This study investigates the extent to which transformational leadership behaviors are universal: by examining if leaders and followers perceive transformational leadership behaviors the same way across cultures; and by determining if the magnitude of satisfaction that followers derive from transformational leadership behavior is the same across cultures. Survey data from 71,537 leaders and their direct reports (n = 203,027) from 77 countries were analyzed. Respondents represented hundreds of different organizations, 12 functional areas, 26 industries, and all management levels. Cultural universality was examined by comparing internal reliability scores and using multilevel mixed coefficient models to assess the similarity of effect sizes in across cultures. Regardless of culture, when interacting with leaders from their own culture, followers were universally alike in their perceptions of transformational leadership behavior and in their satisfaction with such behavior.

Keywords: transformational leadership; cross-cultural leadership; culture; follower satisfaction; Leadership Practices Inventory

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1. Introduction

The ability to unite diverse followers has become more important as organizations grow more culturally diverse (Mendenhall et al. 2012). Organizations' recruiting and operations are increasingly global, and communication technology makes cross-cultural interaction ubiquitous. While cultural heterogeneity has the potential to broaden employees' perspectives, more often, it is perceived as a challenge (Adler and Aycan 2018). Organizations need to foster cooperation among diverse members, and transformational leadership may offer a way to do so, since it comprises a constellation of interpersonal behaviors that help leaders to unite followers in the pursuit of group goals by aligning personal and collective interests (Bass 1985). Evidence suggests that followers around the world favor leaders who exhibit transformational leadership behaviors (House et al. 2004; Van Dierendonck et al. 2017), and that transformational leadership may improve group outcomes for culturally heterogeneous teams (Kearney and Gebert 2009).

However, understanding of cross-cultural transformational leadership behavior is incomplete. Many cultural studies suffer from methodological shortcomings which limit their reliability and generalizability (Tsui et al. 2007; Tung and Stahl 2018), and no studies have tested the extent of transformational leadership's universality (Norenzayan and Heine 2005). Our study responds to these shortcomings by using a larger and more inclusive multi-source sample than any previous work to formally test the universality of transformational leadership behavior. Specifically, we examine two aspects of universality. First, do leaders and followers perceive transformational leadership behaviors the same way across cultures? Second, is the degree of satisfaction that followers derive from transformational leadership behavior of the same magnitude across cultures?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership theory explains how leaders can change followers' perceptions of tasks, motivating them to transcend self-interest and work on behalf of the group (Bass 1985). Transformational leadership behaviors are often contrasted with transactional leadership behaviors because the latter remain focused on self-interest, with leaders providing direct rewards for followers' effort (Bass and Avolio 1997). Rather than influencing behavior through rewards and punishments, transformational leaders cause followers to feel trust, respect, and liking, which motivates them to do more than is formally required or rewarded (Kouzes and Posner 2017).

Transformational leadership involves concrete behaviors that promote cooperation by shaping followers' attitudes and beliefs (Mhatre and Riggio 2014; Podsakoff et al. 1990). There are some variations in typologies of transformational leadership behavior, but the dominant models all address the same core construct and have similar relationships with other constructs (Crede et al. 2019; Mhatre and Riggio 2014). Transformational leadership behavior can be described as consisting of five practices (Kouzes and Posner 2017). First, transformational leaders model the way by clarifying values, setting a clear example, and acting on the alignment between their own values, those of their followers, and those of the organization. Second, transformational leaders inspire a shared vision of an uplifting future that is co-created with followers by encouraging them to voice their own aspirations and motivations. Such leaders help their followers to see that they are part of something meaningful that can only be accomplished by working together. Third, transformational leaders challenge the process by actively seeking opportunities for improvement, being willing to question the status quo, and supporting a climate of experimentation. Fourth, transformational leaders enable others to act by building relationships, promoting cooperation, providing autonomy, and enhancing competencies. Finally, transformational leaders encourage the heart through positive reinforcement. They create community by recognizing both group accomplishments, and individual contributions to the team's success. Taken together, the specific behaviors reflected in these five practices help leaders to motivate and inspire followers toward cooperation (Kouzes and Posner 2017), and have been used extensively in prior research (e.g., Burkman et al. 2019; Caza and Posner 2019; Hage and Posner 2015; Kouzes and Posner 2019; Sherf et al. 2020).

2.2. Culture

Culture refers to fundamental assumptions, practices, and beliefs that are shared by group members, and which influence their perceptions and reactions (Giorgi et al. 2015). Culture is considered a relatively stable characteristic that distinguishes members of one group from another (Tsui et al. 2007). Reflecting shared environments and experiences, as well as knowledge transmitted across individuals and time, culture causes members to be relatively similar to each other, and different from non-members (Hofstede 2001; Inglehart and Welzel 2005), which can lead to observable differences in social attitudes and work practices.

Two cultural frameworks have been used frequently (Giorgi et al. 2015) in global management: Hofstede (2001) dimensional model and Inglehart (1997) developmental one. Hofstede's work is the most widely adopted model of national culture, but has also garnered significant criticisms (Kirkman et al. 2006; McSweeney 2002), including: relying on convenience data from a single American organization (Javidan et al. 2006); debate about the dimensions of culture (Smith et al. 1996); questioning whether national values are sufficient (Adler and Aycan 2018); and skepticism that cultures remain unchanged over time (Beugelsdijk et al. 2015). Inglehart (1997) and his colleagues (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Inglehart and Welzel 2005) have argued for a theory of modernization, positing that economic development leads to predictable changes in cultural norms and values over time. In this model, cultures are broadly defined by two underlying dimensions and tend toward convergence (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Dülmer et al. 2015). However, while there is evidence of global cultural convergence (Dülmer et al. 2015), the proposed two-dimensional structure of Inglehart's model is not supported by empirical data (Welzel 2013).

In response to these limitations, Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) highlighted the compatibility that stems from these two models having complementary weaknesses: Hofstede (2001) model does not account for change or considerations beyond values, while Inglehart (1997) model lacks a stable dimensional structure. Exploring these models' potential synergy, Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) analyzed 500,000 survey responses comprising nationally representative samples from 110 countries that included birth cohorts from 1900 to 1999. Consistent with Hofstede (2001), they found that some values reliably differentiated members of cultures. At the same time, consistent with Inglehart (1997), they found that cultural values change (e.g., many cultures became more individualistic in the past century), and that values were only one of the factors defining cultures—history, economic development, and geography also played important roles in distinguishing between cultures. The Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) model thus provides the a theoretically and empirically informed union of the Hofstede and Inglehart frameworks. Moreover, their model derives from a larger and more culturally diverse sample than previous studies, which suggests both its value and reliability.

2.3. Transformational Leadership in Cultural Context

The extent to which leadership behavior is culturally contingent has been a subject of debate. Some argue that it is contingent (Dorfman et al. 1997) because followers' responses depend on how well a leader reflects their beliefs about the ideal leader (Lord et al. 1984), and such beliefs are likely to be shaped by one's culture. Moreover, since leadership is inherently interpersonal, it is likely that the result of any leadership behavior will reflect the idiosyncrasies of both the leader and the follower (Gardner and Avolio 1998), so culture should moderate the outcome.

Nonetheless, while some behaviors and responses may be culturally contingent, there may also be some that are universal. Despite some important cultural differences in social attitudes and practices, people also tend to be alike in important ways. Regarding this similarity, Norenzayan and Heine (2005) distinguish among three hierarchically ordered kinds of cultural universality. Existential universals are phenomena that are relevant in all cultures, but their frequency and expression vary greatly. Functional universals are not only relevant, but serve the same function in all cultures, though to varying degrees. For example, some have suggested that transformational leadership behavior is a functional universal because followers in all cultures have positive responses to it, but the magnitude of those responses varies by culture (e.g., Caza and Posner 2017; House et al. 2004). Accessibility universals involve phenomena that not only serve the same function in different cultures, but also do so to the same extent (i.e., equivalent effect sizes). Any leadership behavior that was an accessibility universal could be a particularly powerful way of overcoming cultural differences among followers.

Specific to our concerns, transformational leadership behavior has already been shown to have some level of cultural universality. For example, the GLOBE study found that four of its six categories of leadership were globally endorsed (i.e., evaluated positively in all nations), and most of the behaviors in those four categories were components of transformational leadership (House et al. 2004). Given these findings, it seems appropriate to conclude that transformational leadership behavior is positively associated with follower satisfaction in all cultures. Transformational leadership behavior thus meets the criteria for functional universality. However, we are not aware of any investigation of whether transformational leadership behavior is also an accessibility universal. This issue is worth investigating because transformational leadership behavior's status as a functional or accessibility universal has significant theoretical and practical implications in understanding inter-cultural leadership.

The fact that all societies have leaders of some kind may reflect a biological-evolutionary basis for leadership (King et al. 2009). It may be that, as social animals, humans are predisposed to follow leaders (Vugt and Ronay 2014). If humanity has evolved psychological mechanisms to coordinate through leadership, then there may be core leadership behaviors that elicit the same responses from everyone. If such accessibility-level universal leadership behaviors do exist, transformational leadership seems a likely candidate. Its focus on cooperation among individuals in support of collective success is consistent with the social evolutionary strategies that humanity has developed (Axelrod 1984). Moreover, a study of twins found that half of the variance in transformational leadership behavior could be explained by genetics (Johnson et al. 1998), further suggesting that humans have an inherent affinity to such behavior. Based on this reasoning, we examined whether transformational leadership met the criteria of accessibility universality. Specifically, we examined two issues: the level of agreement between leaders and followers about leaders' transformational behaviors (shared perception) and the similarity in followers' satisfaction with transformational leadership behavior (follower satisfaction). Each of these two relationships is described below.

2.4. Shared Perception

Leaders engage in behavior intended to influence followers. However, their behavior is not always experienced as intended (Vecchio and Anderson 2009). If a leader engages in transformational leadership behavior, but is not perceived to do so by followers, then those followers are arguably not experiencing transformational leadership, and are unlikely to display associated responses. Indeed, outcomes are unfavorable when individuals in a position of authority and their followers have significant disagreements about the leader's behavior (Fleenor et al. 2010).

Meta-analysis suggests a moderate correlation between leaders' self-reported transformational leadership behavior and their followers' experience of the same ($\rho = 0.27$; Lee and Carpenter 2018). This value reflects the extent to which leaders' efforts at enacting transformational leadership behaviors are recognized as such by followers. For transformational leadership to satisfy the criteria of accessibility universality, the level of agreement between leaders and followers must be of similar magnitude in all cultures. That is, leaders and followers from Culture A should be no more (or less) similar in their perceptions than those from Culture B.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *The magnitude of leader–follower agreement in perceptions of the leader's transformational leadership behavior is the same in all cultures.*

2.5. Follower Satisfaction

Transformational leadership behavior has been linked to many positive outcomes, but the most fundamental is followers' satisfaction with the leader (Dumdum et al. 2013). Satisfaction with one's leader reflects a positive affective state in response to one's appraisal of the leader's actions (Hackman and Oldham 1975). The more a leader provides followers with what they want and need, the more satisfied those followers will be (Locke 1969; Lord et al. 1984). If the evolutionary logic discussed above applies, and transformational leadership is a universal leadership behavior, it should satisfy basic needs in individuals and thus produce similar satisfaction responses regardless of culture.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The magnitude of the relationship between transformational leadership behavior and follower satisfaction is the same in all cultures.*

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The data in this investigation were generated by a private company that routinely helps individuals assess their leadership behaviors through an online survey platform. Participating leaders provide an assessment of their own behavior and invite their direct reports to provide a confidential assessment of their leadership behavior. The sample included respondents from hundreds of different organizations, representing all levels of hierarchy, 12 functional areas, and 26 industries. The participants were from 77 different countries, and while the sample was predominantly (91.6%) from the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic zone, all zones were robustly represented: Latin America (n = 2037), European (n = 2894), and African-Asian (n = 12,005). We conducted our analyses on data from all leaders (n = 71,537) and their direct reports (n = 203,027) who met three criteria: they were at least 18 years old, had worked together for at least one year, and both self-identified as members of the same culture zone.

Slightly less than half (43%) of the leaders were women; most had a college or graduate degree (81%). Nearly half (49%) had more than 10 years of tenure with their current organization, 23% had 5–10 years, 12% had 3–5 years, and 16% had between one and three years of tenure. By age, the sample of leaders was 18–32 years (10%), 33–40 years (29%), 41–49 years (34%), 50–59 years (23%), and 60+ years (4%). Direct reports were generally younger than their leaders, with less tenure; half were women, and over two-thirds had a college or graduate degree.

3.2. Measures

Transformational leadership was measured using the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI; Posner and Kouzes 1993), which consists of thirty statements focused on leaders' observable behavior, rather than their intentions or character. Leaders and followers used a 10-point scale to report the frequency with which the leader, for example, set a personal example of what they expect from others; spoke with genuine conviction about the higher meaning and purpose of the work; challenged people to try out new and innovative ways to do their work; gave people a great deal of freedom and choice in deciding how to do their work; and, made it a point to let people know about their confidence in their abilities (follower α = 0.97; leader α = 0.94). The LPI is consistent with other transformation leadership measures (Bass 2008; Yukl 2012); for example, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Carless et al. 2000; Chen and Baron 2007). In a study of respondents from six countries across five continents, multi-group confirmatory factor analysis showed a high degree of structural equivalence indicating that the LPI was measuring the same construct across different cultural settings (Zagorsek et al. 2006). Posner (2016) summarized findings from more than a dozen cross-cultural studies using the LPI and reported that the instrument performed well across cultural comparisons. After completing a comprehensive review of the LPI, Fornito and Camp (2010, p. 36) concluded that "the LPI is a strong measure based on its reliability and validity. Its psychometric properties compounded with its global traits suggest it is a measure we can utilize to compare groups across countries with an unbiased scale".

Satisfaction with leader was measured using three statements about the extent to which followers felt their leader (1) set clear expectations; (2) could be trusted; and, (3) was effective as a leader. Satisfaction was rated on 5-point scale of agreement (α = 0.70). We conducted an independent study (not reported here), using a different sample and validated measures, to confirm that this scale performed well across cultures with appropriate convergent and discriminant validity (Details available from the first author).

Culture. The level at which culture is measured is an important consideration (Kirkman et al. 2006). Historically, cultural studies have used national borders to define groups (i.e., nation as culture), but nationality and culture are not necessarily congruent (Tung and Stahl 2018). Therefore, most recent scholarship adopts one of two alternate approaches: studying individual values (i.e., the heterogeneity within a nation) or focusing on supra-national cultural clusters. In contrast to the nation-as-culture approach, the cluster approach combines groups of countries that share core cultural values and other important qualities (Ronen and Shenkar 2013). Supporting the cluster approach, Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) research in 83 countries found that half of the variance in cultural differences was explained by values and the other half was explained by unique historical and geopolitical factors shared among group members. The Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) model identifies four cultural clusters: Anglo-Saxon and Nordic; Latin American; European (except Nordic countries); and African and Asian. These cultural clusters reflect a combination of shared values, economic development, generational effects, and relevant geo-political history. We used the Beugelsdijk and Welzel (2018) results to place each respondent in a cluster based on their reported cultural identification.

Control variables were included in the analyses to account for factors that may influence responses to leadership behavior but were beyond the scope of the current study: leader age, follower age, leader gender, follower gender, leaders' education level, followers' education level, and the length of time the leader and follower had worked together Gender was coded 1 = Female and 2 = Male. A 5-point categorical scale was used for age and tenure, and a 7-point categorical scale was used for education. Failing to control for demographic differences is problematic in cross-cultural research (Tsui et al. 2007; Dülmer et al. 2015).

4. Analysis

To meaningfully compare a scale across cultures, that scale must perform similarly in all cultures (Tsui et al. 2007). We therefore calculated and compared the Cronbach's alpha reliability scores for every measure in each of the cultural clusters (Liu and Weng 2009). For example, the reliability score for followers' ratings of transformational leadership behavior in the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic cluster ($\alpha = 0.97$) was compared with that in the African-Asian cluster ($\alpha = 0.98$) to calculate a Cohen's d score of 0.08. We did the same for every pairwise comparison across clusters.

To assess accessibility universality, we tested whether transformational leadership behavior had the same effect size in all cultural clusters. Therefore, analyses were conducted within followers' cultural clusters (e.g., one model was estimated using Anglo-Saxon and Nordic followers, another using Latin American followers, etc.). Multilevel mixed coefficient models were used because leaders were rated by multiple followers.

Most studies use statistical significance as grounds to reject a null hypothesis of no difference, and thus infer that a difference exists, but we predicted that there would be no meaningful difference between clusters. Some researchers have interpreted a lack of statistical significance as evidence of equivalence, but failing to find evidence of difference is not the same as finding evidence of similarity (Lakens 2017). Simulation studies show that using non-significant difference tests to detect equivalence is inaccurate (Counsell and Cribbie 2015).

Instead, testing equivalence requires defining a zone of indifference, that is, a range of differences that are small enough to be functionally equivalent to zero. If the observed difference between two cultures falls in that range, the result would be statistically significant and suggest cultural equivalence. Lacking theoretical guidance, we adopted Cohen (1988) benchmark: a difference of 0.10 or less between regression coefficients makes those coefficients effectively equivalent (Counsell and Cribbie 2015; Lakens 2017). We used the Hauck and Anderson (1984) equivalence test since simulation studies find it has the lowest Type I error rate (Counsell and Cribbie 2015).

5. Results

Table 1 presents summary statistics. The mean d scores in pairwise comparisons of reliability were small: follower satisfaction with leader 0.06 (SD 0.02); follower-rated transformational leadership behavior 0.12 (SD 0.05); and leader-reported transformational leadership behavior 0.09 (SD 0.05). These values were below the 0.20 threshold for a small difference score (Cohen 1988), suggesting that the measures performed equivalently in all cultures. In addition, using intercept-only random effects models suggested the utility of multilevel modeling, since clustering by leader explained 26.2% of the variance in follower ratings of transformational leadership behavior and 23.6% of the variance in follower satisfaction.

Table 1. Sample descriptive statistics [a].

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
1.Satisfaction with Leader	4.02	0.70							
2. Age	4.68	1.27	−0.04 [−0.05, −0.04]		0.03 [0.02, 0.04]	0.22 [0.21, 0.22]	0.10 [0.09, 0.11]	4.83	1.04
3. Education	2.91	0.96	−0.04 [−0.04, −0.03]	−0.02 [−0.03, −0.02]		−0.12 [−0.13, −0.11]	0.03 [0.02, 0.04]	3.23	0.93
4. Tenure	3.81	1.18	−0.03 [−0.03, −0.02]	0.40 [0.40, 0.41]	−0.09 [−0.10, −0.09]		−0.02 [−0.03, −0.01]	4.05	1.11
5. Transformational Leadership	8.00	1.55	0.65 [0.65, 0.65]	−0.04 [−0.04, −0.03]	−0.01 [−0.02, −0.01]	−0.02 [−0.03, −0.02]		7.59	1.01

[a] Values on the left are based on follower data and ratings (N = 203,027) and data on the right are based on leader data and responses (n = 71,537). Square brackets contain the 95% confidence interval. All $p < 0.05$.

H1 predicted that the relationship between leader and follower ratings of the leaders' transformational behavior would have the same magnitude in all cultures. We estimated four models (one in each cluster), with follower-rated leadership behavior as the dependent variable and leader-reported behavior as the independent variable, plus the seven control variables (Table 2). We then took the beta value for leader-reported behavior from each model and compared it with the same value in every other model to assess whether each pair of values was equivalent. The 95% confidence intervals for the pairwise differences were: Anglo-Saxon and Nordic vs. Latin American [−0.07, −0.00]; Anglo-Saxon and Nordic vs. European [−0.01, 0.05]; Anglo-Saxon and Nordic vs. African-Asian [−0.04, −0.01]; Latin American vs. European [0.01, 0.09]; Latin American vs. African-Asian [−0.03, 0.04]; and European vs. African-Asian [−0.08, −0.01]. All pairwise equivalence tests were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and the largest values in the confidence intervals had magnitudes less than 0.10, indicating that the values were similar enough to be considered equal. H1 was supported; the relationship between leaders' reports and followers' perceptions of transformational behavior was of equal magnitude in all cultural clusters.

Table 2. Multilevel models of cultural-comparative leadership perception [a].

Variable	Anglo-Saxon and Nordic	Latin American	European	African-Asian
Level 2 predictors				
Intercept	6.52 (0.04) *	5.38 (0.45) *	6.12 (0.30) *	6.18 (0.18) *
Leader age	−0.05 (0.00) *	0.01 (0.05)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.02)
Leader gender	0.11 (0.01) *	0.22 (0.09) *	0.08 (0.08)	0.03 (0.04)
Leader education	0.09 (0.01) *	0.03 (0.06)	0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.02)
Leader-reported transformational leadership	0.25 (0.00) *	0.29 (0.04) *	0.23 (0.03) *	0.28 (0.02) *
Level 1 predictors				
Follower age	−0.03 (0.00) *	−0.06 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.16 (0.02) *
Follower gender	0.04 (0.01) *	−0.14 (0.07)	−0.02 (0.06)	−0.12 (0.03) *
Follower education	−0.07 (0.00) *	0.06 (0.05)	0.01 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.02)
Follower-leader relationship length	−0.04 (0.00) *	0.02 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	0.07 (0.01) *
Pseudo-R^2	0.27	0.20	0.29	0.30
Sample size: Level 1	186,091	2037	2894	12,005
Sample size: Level 2	64,875	759	1183	4.720

[a] Dependent variable: Follower-rated transformational leadership. Standard error in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$.

H2 predicted that followers in all cultures would be equally satisfied by transformational leadership behavior. The same analytic procedure was used, except with follower satisfaction as the dependent variable and follower-rated transformational leadership behavior as the independent variable.

Followers' satisfaction with transformational leadership behavior was positive and of equivalent magnitude in all clusters (Table 3). All pairwise equivalence tests were significant ($p < 0.05$) and the absolute magnitudes of the most extreme values in the confidence intervals were less than 0.10: Anglo-Saxon and Nordic vs. Latin American [−0.00, 0.06]; Anglo-Saxon and Nordic vs. European [−0.02, 0.04]; Anglo-Saxon and Nordic vs. African-Asian [−0.00, 0.03]; Latin American vs. European [−0.06, 0.02]; Latin American vs. African-Asian [−0.05, 0.02]; and European vs. African-Asian [−0.03, 0.03]. H2 was supported.

Table 3. Multilevel models of cultural-comparative satisfaction with leader [a].

Variable	Anglo-Saxon and Nordic	Latin American	European	African-Asian
Level 2 predictors				
Intercept	1.88 (0.01) *	2.06 (0.11) *	1.57 (0.09) *	1.91 (0.05) *
Leader age	−0.01 (0.00) *	−0.04 (0.01) *	0.04 (0.01) *	−0.02 (0.01) *
Leader gender [b]	−0.02 (0.00) *	0.03 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Leader education	−0.01 (0.00) *	−0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Level 1 predictors				
Follower age	−0.00 (0.00)	0.04 (0.01) *	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01) *
Follower gender [b]	−0.04 (0.00) *	−0.00 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.01) *
Follower education	−0.02 (0.00) *	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)
Follower-leader relationship length	−0.01 (0.00) *	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.00) *
Follower-rated transformational leadership	0.29 (0.00) *	0.26 (0.01) *	0.28 (0.01) *	0.28 (0.00) *
Pseudo-R^2	0.51	0.49	0.53	0.51
Sample size: Level 1	186,091	2037	2894	12,005
Sample size: Level 2	64,875	759	1183	4.720

[a] Dependent variable: Follower satisfaction with leader. Standard error in parentheses. [b] Gender coded 1 for female, 0 for male. * $p < 0.05$.

6. Discussion

The results were consistent with the prediction that transformational leadership behavior is culturally universal. Followers in all cultures had comparable perceptions of leader behavior and equivalent satisfaction with transformational leadership behavior. Transformational leadership behavior appears to meet the criteria of accessibility universality.

These findings replicate and extend previous ones. The GLOBE study (House et al. 2004) found that followers all over the world positively endorsed transformational leadership (i.e., evidence of functional universality in follower satisfaction). Our results go farther, indicating that transformational leadership behaviors are an accessibility universal—that the effects are identical across the globe—in two regards. First, followers from all cultures had equivalent accuracy in recognizing leaders' transformational leadership behavior. Second, followers derived equivalent amounts of satisfaction from those leadership behaviors.

The fact that some leadership behaviors may have identical effects on followers from all cultures has important theoretical implications. For example, universality is consistent with leadership having a biological basis. Likewise, Adler and Aycan (2018), offered a five-part typology of inter-cultural leadership options, assuming a lack of universality, but our results imply a sixth possibility: situations where the leader and follower are similar in their views, despite being from different cultures. The existence of pan-cultural leadership behaviors challenges many existing assumptions and can expand current leadership theory in important ways.

Although this study had important strengths (e.g., large sample size, cultural diversity, multi-source data, and direct test of equivalence), some important limitations provide fruitful areas for future research. For example, the representativeness of the data is unknown. Although the surveys were professionally back-translated to the participants' language, it is not clear how culturally representative participants were. Self-selection bias may apply, since each leader's organization had to choose to use the feedback platform and each leader chose which direct reports provided feedback. It would be useful to replicate this research in other settings to assess generalizability, both in terms of cultural representativeness and other leadership contexts (e.g., political or religious leaders).

In addition, while the universality findings are consistent with the argument that transformational leadership behavior reflects a genetic predisposition, they do not confirm this explanation. It is equally possible that the universality of transformational leadership behavior arises from cultural convergence (Bass 1997). Distinguishing between these two possibilities would contribute to a better understanding of leadership and culture. Likewise, future work could also examine additional outcomes. Followers' satisfaction with their leader is an essential first step, since, without the support of their followers, leaders are unlikely to be effective (Kouzes and Posner 2017). However, the question arises whether other, more distal responses are also universal. For example, do followers have pan-cultural responses in terms of identification or performance (cf., Crede et al. 2019)?

Another important avenue for future investigation is the inter-cultural universality of transformational leadership behavior. Our results showed that leaders and followers had the same perceptions and responses when interacting with members of their own culture. However, an important aspect of the growing diversity in organizations is that leaders and followers frequently may be from different cultures. It thus will be important to examine how transformational leadership behavior fares in culturally dissimilar leader-follower dyads. For example, will a Chinese follower respond to an American leader's transformational behavior differently than they would to the same behavior from a Chinese leader (Zhang et al. 2014)?

In conclusion, transformational leadership appears to be a universally satisfying style of leadership. Followers around the world reported similar levels of increased satisfaction in response to transformational leadership behavior and showed similar tendencies in their recognition of such behavior from their leaders. At least in terms of follower satisfaction, it appears that transformational leadership is a "safe bet" for how leaders should behave. The results suggest that leaders' efforts at transformational behavior will be recognized and appreciated in similar ways by most followers.

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