Comparison of Rwandan and American Followership Styles

Debby Thomas
Regent University
Kigali, Rwanda

Abstract

Leadership research is plentiful and multifaceted yet followership, an essential component in leadership, attracts little research attention. This research paper measures followership styles in two cultural contexts: American and Rwandan. Although cultural aspects of followership have been studied to some extent, the literature in this area is lacking. Data are collected from two organizations of similar size and function, one in Rwanda, and the other in Oregon, USA. It is hypothesized that Americans' cultural preferences influence followers to favor critical thinking and active engagement while Rwandan cultural preferences predispose followers to less critical thinking and less active engagement. Results of the research show no significant difference between the cultures on critical thinking and active engagement. However, followership type is significantly different by country. Kelley's (1992) followership survey and the organizational contexts are probed for possible reasons that no significant differences were found between critical thinking and active engagement, while power distance is seen as the main reason for the difference in followership type. Presently little research has been dedicated to the cultural effects on followership and organizations that work internationally would benefit greatly from a deeper understanding of cultural effects on followership.

Keywords: followership, culture, African culture

Introduction

Leadership studies have flourished in recent years, but many leadership studies give only cursory consideration to the role of followers in the leadership process. Followership is the central issue in this research endeavor. Followership, like leadership, is affected by culture and this study will consider followership in two cultural contexts: Rwandan (African) and American. This research article particularly considers Kelley's (1992) followership style in these two cultural contexts. This study is relevant to current research because it contributes to a deeper understanding of organizational functioning and followership in cross-cultural contexts.

Kelley and Followership Styles

Kelley (1992) created a measurement tool that measures two continua, independent critical thinking and active engagement, and defines five styles of followership: exemplary, conformist, passive, alienated and pragmatist. Personality, individual preference, organizational climate, leadership styles, national culture and other components can cause followers to adopt one of these five followership styles. The exemplary follower is high in critical thinking and active engagement, and exhibits initiative, takes into consideration the needs and ideas of peers, leaders, and the organization, and possesses the courage needed to present views that may be contrary to those of the leader (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). The alienated follower is also high in critical thinking but is not actively engaged, and therefore has a negative energy, does not interact positively with leaders, and is often seen as the 'troublemaker' (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). The passive follower with dependent thinking and a passive stance does not offer creativity or have internal motivation. Conformist followers are obedient workers who actively engage in their work but are unlikely to engage in independent thinking (Beebe, 2013).

Pragmatic followers, with scores in the middle of both continua, tend to appear in organizations that are unstable, and followers are fearful and desire to stay safe.

Empirical Research on Followership in Cultural Contexts

Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor Carsten et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative study on the social construction of followership in which they concluded that personal and contextual factors weigh in on individuals self- described followership style. It is widely accepted that cultures accept different values and norms (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2008) and it is evident from Carsten et al.'s research that preferred and enacted followership styles are affected by cultural norms. Research has also been conducted on followership styles and job performance in Botswana private universities (Oyetunji, 2012). The Oyetunji (2012) study revealed that the passive followership style (Kelley, 1992) was most highly correlated to job performance. The findings of the Oyetunji (2012) study which indicated that most university professors rated themselves as pragmatist followers, and job satisfaction was highest among passive followers supports the notion that African culture does not affirm either high critical thinking or high active engagement in followers.

Medcof (2012) also conducted research on the impact of culture on followership in which researchers examined differences in Indian and Canadian concepts of prototypical followership. Through a mixed methods study, Medcof (2012) discovered that both personality and national culture affected prototypical followership styles. Medcof (2012) determined that collectivism and power distance were the two cultural components that influenced followership prototypes the most in the Indian and American samples. Medcof's (2012) research is central to the present study providing a basis for the claim that national cultures may have a significant impact on followership.

Cultural Dimensions

The GLOBE study (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2008) measured cultural variables and implicit leadership theories in 62 cultures and found a wide range of preferred leadership styles which vary according to cultural preferences. Leadership and followership are intrinsically related; therefore, it can be postulated that preferred and enacted followership are also impacted by culture. Rather than endorsing one followership style as a universal ideal, this research study more precisely probes the issue of how culture impacts enacted followership. Whereas the GLOBE study uses nine factors to measure cultural values; this paper only considers the two aspects which the Medcof (2012) study found to be most impactful on followership, i.e., *in-group collectivism* and *power distance.*

In group collectivism measures the degree to which an individual "expresses pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations, families, or circle of close friends" (Chhokar et al., 2008). Africa has a high in-group collectivism score of 5-6 (on a 1-7 scale) and sees this score as the ideal, while the United States ranks as one of the lowest (4.3) (Chhokar et al., 2008, fig. A3). Africans will tend to find their identity in groups, and will spend much of their time and energy in group activities. Americans are highly individualistic. Although they take part in in-group activities, they do not tend to be defined by these activities, thus, group activities will be of lower importance. High collectivism will cause followers to resist challenging leadership, therefore creating followers with less critical thinking while high levels of individualism will create followers with higher levels of critical thinking.

Power distance measures the degree to which society prefers unequal distribution of power with greater power at higher levels (Chhokar et al., 2008, loc. 845). High power distance indicates a desire to differentiate between those with high and low power, creating a strictly

adhered to hierarchy. Africa ranks as one of the highest in power distance (up to 5.9), although they desire a much lower power distance (as low as 2.8). America has a low to medium power distance score (4.8), which makes it a more egalitarian society; they wish to have an even lower score (2.8) (Chhokar et al., 2008, fig. A2). Exemplary followers who are high in critical thinking and in active involvement will state their opinions to leaders and are more likely to challenge leaders. Exemplary followership activities such as these would be more acceptable in the American population (lower power distance) and less acceptable in the Rwandan population (higher power distance). The hypotheses that flow from this literature review are the following.

H1: There is a difference in critical thinking between Rwandans and Americans when controlling for age and tenure.

H2: There is a difference in active engagement between Rwandans and Americans when controlling for age and tenure.

H3: There is a difference in followership style between Rwandans and Americans when controlling for gender and tenure.

Control variables

Blanchard, Welbourne, Gilmore, and Bullock (2009) controlled for tenure when assessing followership styles in a university setting. This study also controls for tenure but the expected impact of tenure on participants is expected to be less than in a University setting. According to Smith (2009), gender and age significantly impact some aspects of followership. In a study on followership in a Korean religious congregation, Chai (2011) found that age affects critical thinking, but gender does not. In a study of strategic followership in Africa, Lucas, Zoogah, and Agboh, (2010) also found that age affects followership.

Method

Research Design

As reported by Thomas (2007), to gain valid cultural information, research studies need to consider cross-cultural sensitivity. In the current study, two organizations of similar size and function participated, one in Rwanda, Africa and one in Oregon, USA. The foundational beliefs, size, and hierarchical structure of the two organizations are highly similar.

Sampling and Data Collection

A convenience sample method is used, sampling 117 people, 60 from Rwanda and 57 from America. A sample of 100 will give the sufficient power needed for the factorial ANCOVA test that will test the independent variable of culture, the covariates of age and tenure, and the dependent variable of followership style (Anderson, Hair, Babin, & Black, 2010). An ANCOVA with an effect size of 0.5, error probability of 0.05, power of 0.95, a numerator difference of 1 (2 cultures, 2-1=1, 2 covariates 2-1=1, 1*1=1) requires a minimal sample size of 55 (Anderson et al., 2010).

Participants include pastors, church leaders, regional leaders, and national leaders from both Rwanda Friends Church and Northwest Yearly Meeting. The Rwandan participants completed a printed form of the followership survey, which was back translated into Kinyarwanda (Brislin, 1970). American participants completed an online form of the followership survey in English. Surveys were anonymous, permission to use the survey was asked in the introductory paragraph of the survey, and demographic information was included in the survey.

Instrumentation

Kelley's (1992) 20-question followership styles instrument measures two continua: independent critical thinking and active engagement. The survey uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = rarely to 6 = almost always. The scores are plotted on a matrix and final scores identify five followership styles: exemplary followers, conformist followers, passive followers, alienated followers and pragmatist followers. Blanchard et al. (2009) confirm the reliability and validity of the survey, as well as the two dimensions of the survey through exploratory factor analysis. The Cronbach's alpha for critical thinking in this study is .80 and for active engagement it is .83.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics are used to determine if gender is a factor affecting followership in either of the two population samples. Hypothesis 1 will be tested by an independent sample t-test. Hypothesis 2 will also be tested by an independent sample t-test. This will compare the mean scores of each of the two sample populations for both critical thinking and active engagement. Then an ANCOVA test will be run to test critical thinking and active engagement in both cultures while controlling for age and tenure.

Results

There were 42 females and 75 males surveyed in the study, 36% female and 64% male. The ratio between females and males were consistent between the two samples. A t-test of gender across culture was not significant (t (115) = -.18, p = .86). An independent t-test shows that education is significant with educational levels being significantly higher in the American sample (t (115) = -10.74, p = .00). The mean years of education for the Rwanda sample is 11 while the mean years of education in the American sample is 17.6. The difference in education

levels in Rwanda and America reflect the differences in the country statistics for education. An independent t-test of the mean of critical thinking and active engagement between the two cultures does not show significance, t (115) = -1.73, p = .09 for active engagement and t (115) = -.77, p = .44 for critical thinking. This shows that critical thinking and active engagement are not significantly different as determined by culture.

An ANCOVA test was used to test the fixed factors of culture and gender and the covariates of age and tenure, showing no significant results. The mean critical thinking score in the American sample is 4.09 (out of 6), and in the Rwandan sample, the mean is 4.21 (out of 6). The same ANCOVA was run with the dependent variable of active engagement; again no significant differences were found. The mean of active engagement in the American sample is 4.38 and in the Rwandan sample the mean is 4.37. These ANCOVA tests show that neither critical thinking, nor active engagement, are significantly different between the two cultures and age and tenure do not significantly affect followership. A profile plot showing the mean score for critical thinking between country and gender show that gender does not affect the results. A profile plot for active engagement in Rwanda shows that males have a lower score (4.31) and females have a higher score (4.43), while the opposite is true in the American sample (males = 4.43, females = 4.33).

Hypothesis 3 proposes that there is a difference between the Rwandan and American followership styles. In the present study, 70% of participants were exemplary followers (Group 1), 27.4% were pragmatic (Group 2), 1.7% were passive (Group 3), 1.0% were conformist (Group 4), and 0% were alienated (Group 5). For this reason, only groups 1 and 2 were chosen for chi-square and cross-tabulation. A chi-square test between country and followership type (exemplary and pragmatic) shows that the types are significantly different from one another (p =

.00) and a cross-tabulation shows that followership type by country is also significant: Pearson X^2 (3, N = 117), p = .04. Group 1 representing exemplary followership has 46 participants from the American sample and 36 from the Rwandan sample. Group 2 representing pragmatic followership has 11 participants from the American sample and 21 from the Rwandan sample. The following bar graph gives a visual representation of the differences between followership types by country.

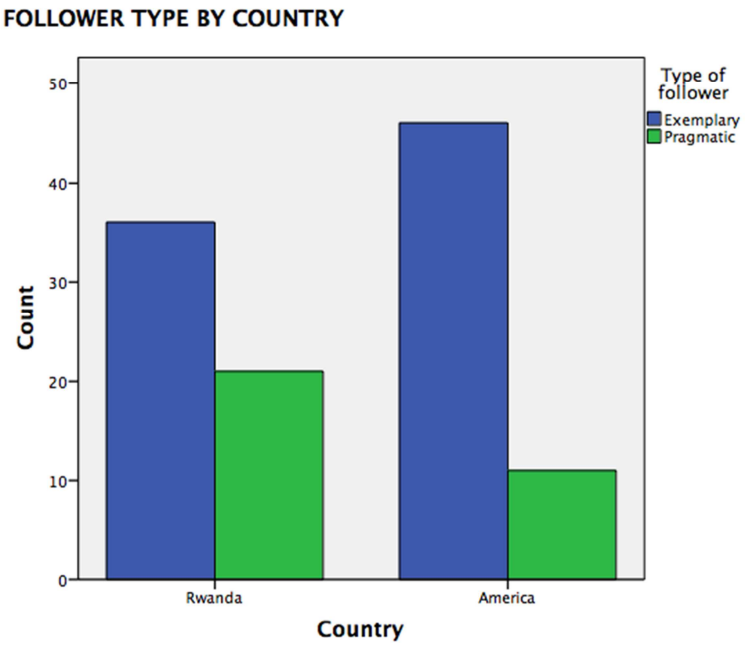

Figure 1. Measuring the number of followers that fall into exemplary and pragmatic followership category by country.

Discussion

This paper proposed to find a significant difference between American and Rwandan followership. Although no significant differences were found between active engagement and critical thinking, followership type by culture was significantly different. The significant difference in followership type between the two countries shows that there is an underlying difference in followership between the two countries. The finding that Americans had a

significantly larger proportion of people in the exemplary followership category than the Rwandan sample shows that Rwandan followers' scores are higher on the high end and lower on the low end. This may be a reflection of a high power distance culture with those in higher levels of leadership reporting extremely high exemplary followership scores (showing high active engagement and critical thinking) and those in lower leadership levels reporting significantly lower pragmatic followership scores. The lower power distance American scores also showed less variance between the highest and lowest level leaders' followership styles than the higher power distance Rwandan scores.

In this research, Kelley's (1992) instrument produced consistently high scores with 70% of scores falling in the highest category of exemplary follower. In a qualitative study on followership, Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor (2010) find that approximately one-third of people align themselves with traditional passive descriptions of followers, whereas in the present study, only 1.7% of participants fall into the passive follower quadrant. In Carsten et al.'s study, another one third of participants fell into an active follower group as defined by followers who were willing and able to express their opinions and offer input when solicited by the leader. In the present sample, 27.4 % of participants fell into this category. In Carsten et al.'s study, the final third of participants aligned themselves with a proactive social construction of followership, whereas in the present study, 70% of the scores were in this category. While Carsten et al. found participants equally dispersed between these three groups, survey results noted in Kelley (1992) were skewed to the high end of the scale. It seems that the way questions are posed in Kelley's (1992) survey makes participants see "bad" followership on the low end and "good" followership on the high end. Instead, a scale that showcases the highs and lows of each of the three groups of followership, as defined by Carsten et al., would be more likely to

identify diverse followership and would encourage participants to identify with their true followership type rather than preferring the high end of the scale. A measurement instrument based on Carsten et al,'s research may produce more diverse results in different cultures.

Conclusion

This study shows no significant difference between the two continua measuring followership in two highly distinct cultures, but does find significant differences in followership type. Further research is needed to decipher whether followership is indeed similar across cultures, or whether the measurement instrument needs to be revised, or if the organizational cultures predominated over the country cultures in this research.

References

Anderson, R. E., Hair, J. F., Babin, B. J., & Black, W. C. (2010). *Multivariate Data Analysis* [Kindle Edition]. doi:10.1007/978-1-4612-0921-8

Beebe, C. (2013). *The relationship between followership styles and organizational safety culture – A quantitative study*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3599275)

Blanchard, A. L., Welbourne, J., Gilmore, D., & Bullock, A. (2009). Followership styles and employee attachment to the organization. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, *12*(2), 111–131. doi:10.1080/10887150902888718

Brislin, R. W. (1970). Back-translation for cross-cultural research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *1*(3), 185–216. doi:10.1177/135910457000100301

Carsten, M. K., Uhl-Bien, M., West, B. J., Patera, J. L., & McGregor, R. (2010). Exploring social constructions of followership: A qualitative study. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *21*(3), 543–562. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.03.015

Chai, D. H. (2011). *Leading as followers: A followership study of the Korean congregational leadership of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3458146)

Chhokar, J. S., Brodbeck, F. C. & House, R. J. (Eds.). (2008). *Culture and leadership across the world* [Kindle Edition]. doi:10.1080/13602381.2011.559082

Crossman, B., & Crossman, J. (2011). Conceptualising followership - a review of the literature. *Leadership*, *7*(4), 481–497. doi:10.1177/1742715011416891

Kelley, R. E. (1992). *The power of followership: How to create leaders people will want to follow and followers who lead themselves*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Lucas, L., Zoogah, D., & Agboh, D. (2010). Determinants of strategic followership: An African perspective. *Journal of International Business and Economics*, *10*, 1–13.

Medcof, T. (2012, December 6). *Followers and followership: An exploration of follower prototypes, national culture, and personality*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database.

Oyetunji, C. (2012). The relationship between followership style and job performance in Botswana private universities. *International Education Studies*, *6*(2), 179–187.

Thomas, A. (2007). Self-report data in cross-cultural research: Issues of construct validity in questionnaires for quantitative research in educational leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *10*(2), 211–226. doi:10.1080/13603120601097488

Author Biography

Debby Thomas is a third-year Ph.D. student at Regent University, where she is studying organizational leadership. For the last 17 years, she has been involved with the Friends Church of Rwanda as a missionary, especially focusing on whole life transformation through a relational discipleship process in Rwandan communities.