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What is This?
Studying Leadership at Cross-Country Level: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract This article critically evaluates the GLOBE project as an example of existing cross-cultural studies into leadership, recognising the project’s value in communicating leadership differences across countries and summarising its methodological limitations. It is suggested that a dynamic and interactive approach is needed to overcome the shortfalls of the GLOBE project. Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) work points the way towards such an approach, and it is the contribution of this article to apply this approach to the relationship between cultural context and leadership in the German and UK chemical industry. Analyses of a mixed methods data set support the theoretical arguments for the dynamic nature of different contexts such as national, organisational, hierarchical and departmental and the importance of this interaction for individual participants’ understanding of leadership. Implications are drawn for the development of global managers in light of these new perspectives on the interaction of cultural context and leadership.

Keywords chemical industry; cross-country research; Germany, leadership; mixed methods; UK

Introduction

Organisational leadership has been a very popular topic within management studies since the early 1900s and its evolution should be seen in light of, and as a response to, the ever-increasing dominance of leadership discourse within organisations of the late 20th and the 21st century (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006) and the belief of Western organisations in leaders as the bearers of change and success (Kotter, 1990; Meindl, 1990). A belief that has been nurtured by a large number of theories and research promoting a predominantly Western, Anglo-Saxon view of leadership, which not only assumes leadership to be a real, measurable phenomenon but which further suggests that there are specific leadership styles that, when adopted adequately, lead to greater organisational success (e.g. Blake et al., 1964; Calder, 1977; Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1984; House, 1977; House & Dessler, 1974; Kenney et al., 1994; Lewin et al., 1939; Lord et al., 1984; McGregor, 1960; Phillips & Lord, 1982; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). This approach is increasingly subject to criticism by those who follow a social constructionist
path and stress the interactional, dynamic aspect of leadership (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; 2003b; Bryman, 2004; Collinson, 2006; Conger, 1998; Day, 2001).

Cross-cultural research into leadership has grown in importance and number of research contributions (Dickson et al., 2003) but has, to date, been characterised by the modernist assumptions underlying much of the above-mentioned Western, Anglo-Saxon view on the individual leader. The GLOBE study is an exemplar of the dominant quantitative approach in cross-cultural research into leadership and represents the most recent and comprehensive attempt to analyse differences in leadership across countries. Its contribution is important and supports the general argument that culture and leadership interact in a variety of different ways in a variety of different contexts. But the GLOBE study falls short in oversimplifying culture, failing to capture the interactional nature of culture and leadership and being shaped by the cultural and linguistic context of its researchers whilst neutralising (Ailon, 2008) the voice of individuals and other languages. What is needed, therefore, is a dynamic and interactive approach to studying leadership across countries and cultures, and Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003) point the way towards such an approach. Yet their work focuses on national identity and hence does not address the relationship between leadership and cultural contexts. It is therefore the aim of this study to address this relationship using a dynamic and interactive approach, viewing leadership as a social construct (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b) and adopting a thick description approach to culture (Geertz, 1973) and, consequently, to contribute new perspectives on the interaction of leadership and cultural contexts.

To do so, the article commences with a critical review of the merits and shortcomings of the GLOBE study’s approach to research and an exploration of the potential advantages of an interactional, dynamic approach. Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) work on social construction of national identity will be used as a lens and illustrative example of the usefulness of the latter approach. This critique, and the merits of the approach offered, are then empirically evaluated in light of the findings from a data set gathered in the German and UK chemical industry. Analyses of wording and content of qualitative interviews from this data set explore the importance of different contexts in an individual’s description of ideal and existing leadership, whilst comparisons between these qualitative accounts and results of the Path-Goal Questionnaire enable further analysis of the merits of the interactional approach. A concluding discussion section then draws attention to the theoretical and practical implications of the findings on the merits of an interactional, dynamic approach to leadership.

The ‘dominant’ approach within cross-country leadership research: a critical analysis of the GLOBE project

Many studies (e.g. Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002; Brodbeck et al., 2000; 2002; Egri & Herman, 2000; Hamlin, 2005; Jung & Avolio, 1999; Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Myers, 1996; McCarthy, 2005; Schneider & Littrell, 2003; Suutari, 1996; 1998; Yeung & Ready, 1995) have looked at leadership in multiple countries, focussing on etics and emics (Graen et al., 1997) and hence exploring the existence of universal or culturally contingent leadership behaviour (see Dickson et al., 2003; and Dorfman,
2004 for full review). In current times of intense global activities of organisations, the findings of these studies have provided substantial guidance for leadership development of global managers and expatriates.

Most of this existing cross-country leadership research is based upon and uses adaptations of existing leadership theories such as Path-Goal Theory, Contingency Theory, Implicit Leadership Theories etc. (e.g. Calder, 1977; Hersey & Blanchard, 1984; House, 1977; House & Dessler, 1974; Kenney et al., 1994; Lord et al., 1984; Phillips & Lord, 1982). These theories share certain underlying assumptions that tend to be reflected in structural, functional models, and have generally been explored through quantitative research. An approach to studying leadership that can be summarised visually as follows in Figure 1.

The most recent and arguably representative example (Dickson et al., 2003) of such research is the GLOBE project (see House et al., 2004 for summary). Similar to previous studies in this field, the GLOBE project defined a list of six leadership styles and national value categories – based on Implicit Leadership Theories, Value-Belief Theory, Integrated Theory and Hofstede’s work on cultural value dimensions – and then developed a standardised questionnaire that measures the extent to which the different leadership styles were accepted or respected amongst a sample of 17,000 middle managers from 62 countries in 951 organisations (House et al., 2004). Subsequent analyses proposed the existence of cultural and leadership clusters in and across different countries. According to House et al. (2004: 24) the main contribution that the project makes to the body of knowledge on leadership is in terms of it serving to ‘fill a substantial knowledge gap concerning the cross-cultural forces relevant to effective leadership (and) provide substantial enlightenment concerning the processes by which culture influences leadership and organisational practices’ (p. 24–5).

This contribution has to some extent been achieved as the communication of findings has certainly provided practical guidance for global managers and expatriates and improved cross-cultural communication (House et al., 2004). Dickson et al. (2003) further argue that the GLOBE findings have advanced our understanding of universally endorsed and culture specific leadership attributes.

**Figure 1** *The positivist approach to successful leadership*
Yet this kind of cross-country, cross-cultural research into leadership has faced a lot of criticism over time, which has served to highlight some important limitations and weaknesses. The rest of this section is divided into three parts that build upon Ailon’s (2008), Graen’s (2006) and McSweeney’s (2002) critiques of quantitative cross-cultural research and focus in particular on the limitations of GLOBE’s methodological approach, measure of culture and use of language.

**Methodological approach**

The general approach of the GLOBE project has been described as ‘an extensive quantitative and qualitative study of 62 cultures’ (House et al., 2004: 10), but has been dominated by the quantitative element of the project. Only the quantitative questionnaire tool has been used in all 62 cultures and the qualitative tools of interviews, focus groups and media analyses were confined to a sub-group of 25 cultures. Equally, most of the research findings communicated to date are based on data from the questionnaire only. The GLOBE project, however, has both explanatory and exploratory aims such as discovering universal and culture-specific leadership behaviour that is accepted and effective as well as understanding the process of how culture affects leadership behaviour. Whilst the predominant use of a standardised questionnaire has undoubtedly generated data that provides scope to fulfil the explanatory aims of ‘discovering’ universal and culture-specific leadership behaviour, it remains unclear how and to what extent this approach could be used to answer the exploratory aims of this project and to determine the process by which culture affects leadership.

For example, the standardised questionnaire as a tool for studying leadership has been evaluated by Conger (1998) who has raised concerns regarding this tool and models derived from such research as they are designed to model an abstract generalisation of reality that consequently fails to capture the contextual complexity of and continuous changes in the nature of work, organisational structures, interpersonal interaction and leadership (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Bryman et al., 1988; Conger, 1998).

Furthermore, the use of survey-based measurement of effective leadership has purely focused on a single level of analysis: the individual (such as the middle manager within the GLOBE project) (Yukl, 1994) and is not designed for the study of interactive processes, such as how followers and leaders influence each other or how different contexts influence each other and affect leadership. Consequently, it can be argued that the static, i.e. fixed, stationary approach of the GLOBE project does not allow for a consideration of dynamic and continuously changing and interactive processes between societal culture or other contextual factors on the one hand and leadership on the other hand, which again raises questions regarding the validity of conclusions derived from such a dataset concerning processes of cultural influences on leadership.

**Measure of national culture**

A second concern with the questionnaire tool of the GLOBE project is its simplified conceptualisation of national context. In common with other such studies the GLOBE project focuses on the use of national culture dimensions as first developed by Hofstede (1980) to explain variations of leadership across cultures and countries.
Apart from the limited insight that is gained through such a narrow focus, important criticism has questioned the validity of such general cultural dimensions (e.g. McSweeney, 2002). Hofstede’s underlying theoretical assumptions presume that national culture is implicit, core, systematically causal, territorially unique and shared (McSweeney, 2002). These strong assumptions have been criticised heavily as it seems questionable to assume that every person in a country has the same set of values that is guiding his/her behaviour (Graen, 2006). Indeed, contradictory to his assumption of cultural determinism, Hofstede’s own data actually showed a fair amount of within-country variation in cultural dimensions. Furthermore, Tayeb (2001) has raised the concern that when ‘putting culture into neat, sometimes unconnected, little boxes we are in danger of losing sight of the big picture’ (p. 93), and ascribing certain cultural characteristics to a whole nation without reconsideration over time, hence ignoring the dynamic, continuously changing nature of culture (Dickson et al., 2003). Admittedly the GLOBE researchers (House et al., 2004) do acknowledge certain limitations of Hofstede’s original culture dimensions and recognise regional cultural variation within countries in principle. However, sub-cultures of only 4 countries were considered in the final data set. Further, when outlining the overall rationale behind the GLOBE project approach, House et al. (2004) specifically point out that ‘our primary goal when developing these (culture and leadership) scales was to differentiate between organisational and societal cultures. They were not specifically designed to measure differences within cultures or between individuals’ (p. 146).

Tayeb (2001) stresses that the problem with such a minimalist approach is the lack of relevant details given on the cultures studied and a lack of consideration of non-cultural factors influencing the context of individuals. A view which Graen (2006) agrees with and points out has significant implications for any generalisations derived from the GLOBE findings regarding effective leadership.

Use of language

A third point of concern over the use of the value dimensions, leadership categories and the questionnaire tool used within such cross-country leadership research in general and the GLOBE project in particular concerns the differing meanings that these dimensions, categories and questions may take across countries, languages and different social groups. Standardised questionnaires that have been designed to link previously defined leadership styles with a set of contextual factors and quantify this link, claim to be very robust and reliable as they use exactly the same concepts, words etc. for every single participant in a given study. House et al. (2004) have even argued that their large sample of middle managers enables generalisations reflecting broader societies due to their careful generation of unobtrusive measures.

Yet, this requirement of standardisation poses a significant problem as, despite the careful translation of the questionnaires – as carried out within the GLOBE project – into different languages and back, this approach ignores the meaning of leadership styles in different languages since it entails analysing the results at ‘face value’ (Graen, 2006). Thus, Tayeb (2001: 103) points out that ‘language represents and expresses culture’; hence treating language as a neutral device to studying leadership across countries ignores this role of language as a transmitter of meaning that is a
product of historical, social interaction which is idiosyncratic to specific social groups and individuals (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Van Maanen, 1979; Wittgenstein, 1953). Ailon’s (2008) deconstruction of Hofstede’s (1980) Cultural Consequences vividly demonstrates the pitfalls of standardisation present in quantitative cross-cultural research and suggests that it leads to neutralisation and silencing of other languages and meanings, favouring the cultural and personal views of a study’s researchers and leading to a polarisation between Western beliefs and ‘the rest’ of the world. Written texts and subsequent theories such as the ones in Cultural Consequences hence need to be recognised as inherently value-laden and political rather than scientifically neutral.

Whilst recognising these issues of language and different conceptualisations of leadership in different countries, the GLOBE project still uses a questionnaire tool that has been back translated by individual translators and the final set of cultural and leadership scales is a result of individual choices made by the group of academics involved in this project, hence still bearing some of the pitfalls outlined by Ailon (2008).

Indeed, House et al. (2004) admit that the GLOBE project was not interested in the exact words used in the translations of the questionnaire. Yet, the participants in a study may indeed interpret the formulation of a questionnaire and the meaning of leadership styles in different ways amongst each other and compared to the interpretations of the researchers. Ignoring a possible mismatch in interpretations bears the risk of designing questionnaires that ignore the possibility that the meaning of some words may change significantly between different languages (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Smith et al., 2002; Van Maanen, 1979; Wittgenstein, 1953) which may lead to a significant bias in the interpretation of the data and their implications for leadership theory and practice when generalising such biased interpretations across a whole country. It therefore seems imperative to put findings of any study back into context and ask more often ‘What does this mean and why?’. Standardised questionnaires simply cannot do this and are therefore not an adequate tool if the aim is to understand the meaning of leadership in a specific country in depth and in relation to the importance of different contexts.

Taken together such methodology problems with studies such as the GLOBE project suggest that we need to rethink our approach to studying leadership across countries and embrace rather than simplify the complexity of national origin and effective leadership. We need to view leadership as a social construct and take into account language, experience and knowledge-specific individual, regional and national differences amongst individuals’ understanding of leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b). Furthermore, acknowledging Tayeb’s (2001) verdict that ‘national culture is a complex construct and we simplify them at our own peril’ (p. 95), this article proposes that we need to embrace a more holistic, thick description (Geertz, 1973) approach towards national origin and culture and look at leadership in the context of wider national factors such as history, institutions and language that influence and reflect culture, whilst also being open to other contexts that may affect leadership and interact with the national context. The dynamic nature of different contexts and their possible influence on an individual’s understanding of leadership can be tentatively visualised as follows in Figure 2.
Against the background of the above criticisms of such quantitative studies as the GLOBE project, more and more researchers have moved away from the focus on individual leadership attributes and have started to study leadership as a social process (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b; Bryman, 2004; Collinson, 2006; Conger, 1998). In doing so, they have often utilised the basic assumptions of social constructionism as a theoretical foundation. Social constructionism challenges the conventional perspective on knowledge as an unbiased and objective view of the world and instead assumes knowledge to be a product of culture and history (Burr, 1995). Berger and Luckmann (1966) have vividly defined the process by which social actors and their social worlds interact with each other and through these interactions construct individual, social identity and experienced reality (Hatch, 2006).

Applied to leadership research, this approach challenges the assumption that leadership is ‘out there’, and can be observed and perceived as a real and stable phenomenon. Instead, the definition and perception of leadership are seen to be subject to factors such as ‘tasks, organisations, kinds of people, and societal and organisational cultures’ (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b: 377). In this approach, what constitutes a leader is hence a social construct of all actors involved, with an infinite number of contextual factors impacting on the construct ‘leadership’. Such
an approach further embraces the idea that leadership as an abstract concept of a social process is embedded in some form in most languages and societies’ shared knowledge and understanding (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b) and that its essential meaning has been constructed over time through the interaction, interpretation and sense-making of people.

Researchers with a social constructionist approach to leadership have consequently criticised existing literature on leadership as being too determinate (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b). Subsequently these researchers have looked at specific aspects of leadership as a social process, such as the role of followers, leadership as a collective phenomenon, distributive leadership, leadership discourse etc. The outcomes of this research effort have led to important insights on the construction of leadership at the individual, group and organisational levels that have improved our depth of understanding of the existence and meaning of leadership by providing a greater focus on interpersonal dynamics and relationships and critical analyses of its mythical and symbolical aspects. Research projects based upon the assumptions of the constructionist approach to leadership tend to utilise qualitative research methods (see review by Bryman, 2004) and it could be argued that applied to the study of leadership across countries, these methods overcome problems of minimalism, overly objectivist assumptions and the static nature of previous quantitative studies as they leave room for greater sensitivity to contextual factors and flexibility to explore unexpected phenomena or symbolic dimensions of leadership in different countries.

Building on these fundamental epistemological assumptions on leadership, this article proposes to draw on Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) recent work on social construction of national and organisational identity as an illustrative example of such an interactional approach. Whilst this work does not address the relationship between leadership and cultural contexts, it will serve as a useful lens for data analyses that enables the exploration of not only differences in leadership between but also differences within countries and cultures. Having faced similar concerns within the field of cross-cultural studies, i.e. static, minimalist approach and overly objectivist and essentialist conceptualisations of culture and national identity, Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003) have developed their dynamic model with a view to overcoming these problems. They suggest that cross-cultural studies should ‘take into account the freedom that members have in defining what national belonging means, in shaping this (national) identity’ (p. 1074).

Drawing on the post-modernists’ view on identities as ‘mobile constructs’ (Sarup, 1996 cited in Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003: 1075) and ‘infinite combinations of cultural possibilities that can be picked and chosen like clothes from shelves’ (Mathews, 2000 cited in Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003: 1075), Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003: 1075) propose that national identity is a flexible social construct that takes on ‘variable and fluctuating meaning’ for individuals. They go on to explore this notion of dynamic social construction of national identity in their study of a merger between an Israeli high-tech company and an American competitor. In doing so, they demonstrate that within this global context, national identity represented a powerful symbolic resource to re-establish informal organisational boundaries between the employees of the two merger companies. Communality within the two companies was socially constructed through language reflecting national identities.
The main implication of this research is that national identity, as a wider notion of national culture and origin, is not imposed on individuals. Individual actors are instead free to draw on national identity and express commonalities in language and behaviour with other individual actors from the same country when and as necessary within a specific context – for example an unwanted international merger. National identity is, however, only one of the symbolic resources that help individual actors to make sense of their global reality. Applying this notion of dynamic social construction of reality to leadership may aid our understanding of the existence of variation in leadership behaviour within a country, hence avoiding the pitfalls of minimalism and overly objectivist assumptions on leadership. Empirical research adopting this approach may consequently complement, correct and enrich the existing contribution of cross-cultural studies like the GLOBE project to the leadership development of global managers.

The study

In the following, the methods and data set from a cross-country study in the UK and German chemical industry will be outlined. Findings from the qualitative accounts of 105 interviewees on ideal and existing leadership will then be discussed and compared with the results from the Path-Goal Questionnaire used in this research.

Methods and data

This research has adopted a non-traditional methodological approach, consisting of a mixed methods approach to data generation and a variant of the analytic induction approach to data analysis. A rich data set has been generated via interviews with managers and their subordinates in the German and UK chemical industry over the course of 12 months (March 2004–April 2005). Each interview consists of a dominant qualitative interviewing part and the complementation of the data set via three short questionnaire (Path-Goal Theory Questionnaire, Hofstede’s Cultural Questionnaire, and Handout on Educational Background) around the topics of leadership, national culture and education.

The first qualitative part is a set of open-ended questions asking participants to elaborate on their own opinion regarding what constitutes leadership in the organisation, what impacts on the behaviour of a leader and what kind of leadership is displayed by their superiors and generally within their company. The interviewees are also encouraged to talk about their daily interaction with superiors, subordinates and colleagues as well as their own leadership styles. In the second part of the interview the participants are asked to fill out the Path-Goal Theory Questionnaire (assigning managers to one of four leadership categories), Hofstede’s Cultural Questionnaire and a handout on their educational/vocational background. These quantitative questionnaires serve as a tool of triangulation and their findings are compared with the qualitative accounts given during the first part of the interview. For the purpose of this article, only the findings from the qualitative accounts and the results for the Path-Goal Questionnaire will be used.

The total data set of this project consists of 105 interviews – 63 managers and 42 employees without managerial status. Managerial status is defined as either a position
that other employees formally or informally report to and could hence be labelled as a position with people responsibility. Previous leadership studies (e.g. Edwards & Gill, 2003; Katz & Kahn, 1966; 1978; Leavitt, 2003) have argued for the importance of hierarchical influences on the construction of leadership. However, as discussed above, cross-country research has so far omitted an exploration of the importance of organisational hierarchy and instead tends to focus on the perceptions of middle managers only. This project has tried to overcome this flaw by interviewing employees from a range of departments and hierarchical levels with special attention paid to hierarchical reporting lines, i.e. interviewing direct subordinates of each manager in the sample.

Seventy-eight of the 105 interviews were conducted in a total of nine chemical companies located in Germany and the other 27 interviews took place in three chemical companies located in the UK. The companies in each country varied in firm size, industry segment, firm age and were located in different regions within each country.

The interviews in Germany and the UK were conducted in five waves – treated as separate cases – over the course of 12 months (March 2004–March 2005), lasting each for two weeks and including between 19–26 interviews during each wave. Each interview was tape-recorded and supplemented by notes taken during the interview. In between each interview wave these tapes and notes were then used to transcribe, code and analyse the interviews. Based upon the experience and analysis, the interview questions were updated to account for any gaps that had arisen and to get the full depth of possible answers to the research questions. Arising themes were summarised in reports at the end of each interview wave. To gain a better understanding of the importance of different contexts for the sense-making and display of leadership and to make further sense of the arising themes found in the first wave of analyses, a second round of in-depth analyses of wording and content of key interview questions was conducted within different sub-groups of the data set – e.g. country, organisation, department, hierarchy, gender, age.

Findings
This section is divided into two parts. The first of these presents and analyses the 105 descriptions of desired and existing leadership behaviour, looking in depth at the dynamic nature and importance of different contexts, such as national, organisational, departmental, hierarchical affiliation, for a participant’s understanding of leadership. Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) social construction approach will be used as a lens for further interpretation of the findings from this analysis. Figure 3 summarises some of the many different areas of context found to be of importance for participants’ understanding of leadership within this specific sample.

The second then compares this qualitative data with the Path-Goal Questionnaire results obtained to discuss the relative merits of an interactional approach when studying leadership across countries.

Defining ideal leadership and describing existing leadership in context
The 105 interviewees in this cross-country data set were asked to define what they think leadership is and to describe ‘ideal’, ‘desired’ leadership behaviour, attributes,
The analyses of the data generated from this question showed that leadership definitions differed in wording across individuals but also revealed themes within several data sub-groups that can be interpreted as embodying a shared understanding of what ‘ideal’, ‘desired’ leadership behaviour is.

Regarding the national data sub-sets, interviewees in both countries elaborated on the social competence of a leader. In doing so, however, the words they used and the meanings attached to these words varied, with greater emphasis on transformational aspects of leadership in the UK versus greater emphasis on listening, support and active involvement according to expertise amongst the German interviewees.

I think he has to have a vision and goals and he has to have the ability to bring people on board and to pull them in the same direction. I think he also has to command people with respect in terms of their ability and how he goes about . . . how’s the person. If people only respect you for your position, you are in a losing from the start. People have to respect you for your ability. (Research and Development Manager, UK)

What I think is important, is that you can evaluate your subordinates and then place them accordingly in the right positions. So, that you say this person has a strength there and a weakness there. Because I think every person is somehow different and a leader should use this for the good of the company. And what is important is to give subordinates enough space, enough freedom. ( . . .) But of
course with big decisions it is always important that the boss makes the decision. (Sales office worker, Germany)

Another difference between the two country sub-samples was that the German interviewees regarded functional competence as comparatively more important than the UK interviewees and overall seemed to look for a good balance between social and functional competence. Interestingly, this German theme of competence was further linked to the acknowledgement of competence boundaries between a leader and his/her subordinates.

Many of the German interviewees explained that a leader ought to recognise his/her subordinates’ expertise but at the same time know exactly where their expertise ends and where the leader’s expertise starts so as to take control and responsibility when required by existing competence boundaries. Linked to this theme of competence-driven leadership behaviour and acceptance of leaders in Germany was the lack of much critical evaluation of the existence of leadership behaviour on a daily basis.

To avoid confusion of the terms ‘leader’ and ‘manager’, participants were asked to reflect on differences between managers/managing and leaders/leading. None of the German interviewees questioned the assumption that they or their boss were really leading rather than managing. The UK interviewees on the other hand had, overall, a more critical approach towards the actual possibility of displaying leadership on a daily basis.

If somebody says to me what style would I like to adopt then I’d say if I had the time and energy it would be more coaching than anything else. But I think sometimes you just have to say to people well this is the direction I want to go or this is what I want to do and we need to make it happen. (Managing Director, UK)

The respective similarities within the national sub-samples were further supported and explained by the subtle differences in descriptions offered around existing leadership behaviour in the 12 companies involved in the study. The commonalities in language amongst the participants from the same country in this study seem to reflect and symbolise different nationally ingrained approaches to knowledge and competence, resembling Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) findings on national identity being reflected in the language their participants used.

In the German sub-sample, the majority of interviewees used the word ‘kollegial’ to describe existing leadership behaviour, whereas the UK interviewees tended to describe themselves and others mainly as coaches and supporters. The participants from within each national sub-set attached very specific meaning to these words – ‘Kollegial’ and ‘coaching’ – that reflect shared views within the national sub-sets on the role of leaders and the relationship between leaders and followers. The theme of kollegial leadership, for example, is defined as ‘primus inter pares’, the first amongst equals:

That I see myself as on the same level as my subordinates. . . . I cannot be successful on my own. I can only be that with my colleagues and they need me as well. (Managing Director, Germany)
It is a thin line between being too friendly and too directive and you have to find the right point in the middle. (Shift Coordinator, Germany)

This term ‘kollegial’ was further described as involving respect for, and acknowledgment of, subordinates’ expertise and competence and therefore resembles the theme of social and functional competence discovered in the context of ideal leadership descriptions in the German sub-sample. This national competence theme should be seen in light of the strongly regulated German system of education and the way in which the historical importance of craft skills has promoted the notion of competence and education as a form of self-actualisation (Armbuester, 2004; Fear, 1997; Herrigel, 1997). ‘Kollegial’, and with it authority legitimisation via expertise, reflects the strong belief in technical expertise and education (Armbuester, 2004) and constitutes a superior form of status and acceptance to that of organisational hierarchy.

Coaching as an activity was, in contrary, rarely addressed by the German respondents and seemed to be almost taken-for-granted by the participants, perhaps, because it is less needed given the stronger emphasis on qualified skills than in the UK and also embedded strongly within organisations due to the overall belief in ‘bildung’ as a personal and social responsibility. The word ‘kollegial’ can, then, be interpreted as a symbol of this nation-specific approach to competence and knowledge and is in its meaning, and in German interviewees’ understanding of it, very different from the meaning of the equivalent English term ‘collegial’, a finding that highlights the importance of acknowledging historical, national contexts on leadership discourse.

Overall, these national themes in the data support the assumption that the participants in this research shared specific expectations and experiences of ideal and existing leadership within their country sub-samples. At the same time, while national origin seems to matter, its importance was found to vary among the German and the UK interviewees. Indeed, other contexts were found to be of importance as well, supporting Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) argument that national identity is only one of many factors shaping an individual’s construction of reality.

Comparing the descriptions of ideal leadership within other data sub-sets showed that organisational affiliation, for example, seems to matter especially in the presence of a strong organisational culture or in the context of an organisation-wide crisis. Descriptions of ideal leadership abilities and behaviour were further detected to be more similar at the same hierarchical level and within the same departments, reflecting the importance of shared immediate context and tasks, as well as follower abilities and expectations. The latter finding of departmental affiliation as an important context affecting interviewees’ descriptions of ideal leadership was further detected to be a strong common theme within the accounts of existing leadership behaviour. For example, existing leadership behaviour within research and development (R&D) was predominantly described as laissez-faire, hands-off and utilising the creativity and self-motivation of subordinates.

If you do, and this sounds terribly sad, but if you go to university and you do chemistry and you want to do it for living that is your motivation. So most of your motivation or let’s say my motivation comes from actually wanting to do it. And I wouldn’t want to do anything else. So, but that is half of it, so most of
your motivation comes from that really. Wanting to do a good job, being a professional, using the knowledge you’ve got in another application. (Lab Technician, UK)

The educational background and the nature of the tasks to be done by the subordinates also seemed to affect what was expected from a leader and what kind of leadership behaviour they received. Finally, comparing definitions of ideal leadership and descriptions of existing leadership for each individual revealed similarities in the content of the two accounts for a large number of interviewees. There hence seemed to be a link between an interviewee’s idea of ideal leadership and what he/she seemed to see or display as leadership behaviour on a daily basis in his/her organisation. One example of this is the definition of ideal leadership given by a lawyer in one of the German companies and her subsequent, rather critical evaluation of her superior’s leadership behaviour:

[Definition]: The ability to delegate... To delegate in such a way that you leave the person enough freedom. Because nobody likes to work with more responsibility but no freedom... Then it is important to motivate subordinates and on the other hand to criticise in an objective manner. But in a sensible way. And then it is important to be open for the arguments of your subordinates.

[Description of superior’s leadership]: Well if I look at the criteria mentioned earlier, then Mr X leaves us enough freedom to make our own decisions. But sometimes I wish that he would inform me about the important things that are going on... It is also sometimes a bit difficult to say something in his presence. You have probably noticed it. He is sometimes talking a lot.

These two quotes show that there is a clear link between the lawyer’s definition of ideal leadership and the leadership behaviour that her superior is actually displaying on a daily basis, reflecting the social construction process in which this participant draws upon knowledge and experience of existing leadership to form her view of ideal leadership.

In summary, these qualitative accounts around ideal and existing leadership behaviour have offered a wealth of different themes. Analysing the wording and content of these accounts has revealed national, organisational, hierarchical and departmental themes that show the importance of different contexts on an individual’s understanding of leadership. Within each interviewee’s account, these themes are reflected to differing degrees, and when seen through the lens of Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) dynamic model of identity construction, this can be interpreted as the individual’s continuously ongoing and changing process of social construction of reality and leadership that draws on different contexts and identities in different circumstances. These different contexts are hence dynamic and interactional influences on this social construction process and therefore reflected differently in the 105 participants’ accounts on leadership. Hence, no fixed, static model of leadership can be drawn for specific individuals or across specific groups of individuals.
Comparing interview and questionnaire responses

Comparing the qualitative descriptions of leadership behaviour of the 63 managers in this sample with the mixed results of the Path-Goal Questionnaire showed that in principle the majority described their leadership behaviour in similar ways as a mix of their highest two scores from the Path-Goal Questionnaire would indicate.

One example for this is the results for the head of a chemical plant in the German sample. Looking at the results for the Path-Goal questionnaire, the highest score of this manager was for directive leadership and the second highest was for participative leadership. When asked how he would describe his own leadership behaviour he replied: ‘Definitely kollegial’. He then explained that in a plant there has to be a strict understanding of responsibility and that applies to him as well as to all other employees. Everybody participates in weekly seminars to further the level of information and knowledge amongst the employees. He therefore described a directive element of leadership by outlining his own sense of responsibility and the trust of his subordinates in his use and display of this responsibility. The participative element of leadership was then reflected in his belief in shared responsibility throughout the plant and the enhancement of this shared responsibility via weekly seminars. Another good example for similarities in qualitative and quantitative findings are the results for one of the R&D managers in the UK sample. His results for the Path-Goal Questionnaire showed that he scored highest on participative and second highest on supportive leadership behaviour. When asked to describe his behaviour towards his subordinates, he replied:

I try to be a friend. . . . I have actually worked in the lab and then got promoted. We were already friendly on that basis and that is how I try to do it. It is a bit different from the shop floor. . . we already got that relationship built up, which is good because it means we generally get on. Because you know people, you know when to give them a bit of space. Some people need more space than others. . . you know a bit more about people’s background and know maybe I should step back here or give somebody more time to themselves sort of thing. Just let them get on with it.

This quote illustrates well his participative and supportive behaviour towards his subordinates, who seem to be treated more as colleagues than subordinates. The friendly and collegial atmosphere partly stems from the fact that the R&D manager has been promoted into this position after having worked as a colleague within the department for a long enough time to become friendly with the other members. A very important part of his role as their leader seems to be the supportive element which means, for him, knowing when to step in and when to leave his subordinates complete freedom. His interpretation and display of a participative and supportive leadership is hence strongly influenced by the immediate group context.

In fact, this mixed methods approach also revealed that the interpretation and application of the very general leadership behaviour categories of the Path-Goal Theory vary substantially across countries, micro-level context and individuals. Participative leadership is lived by the German plant manager through a proactive involvement in responsibility and weekly training, whereas the UK R&D manager exhibits participative leadership by treating his subordinates as colleagues and leaving them as much
freedom and control over their work as they need. These individual differences in interpretations of a specific element of leadership behaviour need to be seen in context of the overarching theme of differences in language, jargon and approach to knowledge that differ across the German and UK sub-samples as well as the specific context of departments and roles. This supports Ailon’s (2008) argument that standardised and hence neutralised questionnaires silence individual voices and meaning, leading to misrepresentations of their views on a phenomenon. Hence, generalised leadership categories used for quantitative questionnaires are not able to capture these differences in sense-making and, if analysed in isolation of the personal, linguistic and national context, may lead to misinterpretations of leadership behaviour.

Conclusions

This article has critically reviewed the GLOBE project as a representative example of much of the existing quantitative-based research in the field of cross-cultural research into leadership and acknowledged its contribution to our understanding of differences in leadership across cultures. It has further drawn our attention to several methodological limitations of the GLOBE project’s research approach. First of all, the standardised questionnaire used tends to treat both culture and leadership in a too minimalist, static and overly objectivist way, limiting our understanding of the complex, fluid and fragmented nature of cultural contexts. Further concerns were raised regarding potential interpretation bias through the treatment of language as a neutral tool in standardised questionnaires and the ignorance of individual voice and interpretation of the questionnaire tool, leadership styles and culture dimensions that leads to overly objectivist generalisations. Consequently, an alternative dynamic, interactional approach to the phenomenon leadership was proposed and Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) social construction model of national identity introduced as an illustrative example of such an approach within cross-cultural research. This article’s main contribution, then, lies in the application of their approach to the relationship between leadership and cultural contexts in the German and UK chemical industries, creating new perspectives on the interaction of leadership and cultural contexts.

The empirical analyses have supported the theoretical arguments of this article and offered two tenets. First, analyses of the qualitative interview data showed the importance and role of different contextual factors other than national culture. Indeed, national origin was found to be just one of many contextual factors influencing an individual’s understanding of leadership. Definitions of leadership and descriptions of existing leadership differed in wording and content across individuals and reflect personal experiences. Yet, the analyses also found similarities within the definitions and descriptions of leadership that reflect the importance of national, organisational, hierarchical and departmental contexts on a participant’s understanding of leadership. The importance of these different contexts was found to vary across individuals. A finding that can be seen as an outcome of an individual’s own construction of social reality and leadership when analysed through the lens of Ailon-Souday and Kunda’s (2003) dynamic approach. It is a process that draws at different points in time and in different circumstances on different contexts and group affiliations more strongly, i.e. national, organisational, departmental or hierarchical.
Second, the empirical analyses revealed differences in participants’ interpretation of leadership styles and questionnaire scales, supporting the criticism of previous studies using standardised questionnaire tools and stressing the importance of acknowledging personally influenced interpretations of generic leadership styles that are crucial to individuals’ understanding of leadership and that cannot be captured by standardised questionnaires. For example, in several cases, interviewees’ definitions of ideal leadership were strongly linked to their account of existing leadership that they displayed or had experienced. Further, the comparison of the quantitative results of the Path-Goal Questionnaire with the qualitative data on leadership behaviour has demonstrated the very different understanding and application of generic leadership styles by different individuals within different circumstances. The significant influence of individual interpretations needs to be acknowledged and explored rather than neutralised.

This data set has clear limitations such as its focus on one quite specific industry and its focus on participants’ opinions rather than actual behaviour and any results and conclusions drawn from this study can therefore not be generalised beyond the boundaries of this data set. But despite its limitations, the empirical analyses of this data set have provided several very interesting – as well as some new – insights into the construction of leadership in a specific industry in two different countries, and therefore support empirically the theoretical argument of this article that a dynamic, interactional approach to studying leadership across countries improves our understanding of how individuals in different countries make sense of and come to display leadership behaviour. It enables investigations that are more sensitive to the complex nature of different contexts, overcoming the minimalist and overly objectivist approach of existing studies in the field.

Within the era of globalisation and organisational belief in the importance of leadership for organisational success, the findings of this research also have serious implications for practitioners within organisations and coaches delivering leadership training as it calls into question the view that national culture is primarily driving leadership behaviour and that we can identify universal leadership styles that will work for everybody. It therefore complements the contribution of previous research such as the GLOBE project (see House et al., 2004) in suggesting that leadership development programmes need to consider national origin and culture in more depth via historical, educational and discourse-related factors affecting individuals’ behaviour within international companies. The findings around the importance of departmental affiliation should further remind us that even within an international organisation, it may be the immediate, group-level context rather than national culture that drives leadership behaviour.

It may be concluded that whilst quantitative-based studies into leadership across countries are valuable and provide easily accessible and practical advice for global leadership development, they bear significant limitations that hinder an in-depth understanding of the interactional nature of leadership and its context. Hence, more research is now needed that adopts a dynamic, interactional approach looking at leadership in different countries in order to avoid overly stereotypical treatment of leadership and culture, and to improve our understanding of variation in leadership behaviour within a specific country.
References


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