

**Culturally Specific or Generalizable: The Occurrence and Effectiveness of  
Transformational Leadership in Iran**

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## **Culturally Specific or Generalizable: The Occurrence and Effectiveness of Transformational Leadership in Iran**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to offer a comprehensive review of the extant research on the emergence and effects of transformational leadership (TL) in Iran. The review shows that TL research in Iran has considerable similarities with findings emerging from the Western context with regards to the effects of TL on individual and organizational outcomes. However, there is scant research on what factors contribute to the emergence of this leadership, how it weaves its effects on outcomes and when this leadership behavior is more or less effective. Specifically, the role of culture as an antecedent of TL and as a boundary condition of its effects has received sparse attention.

**Keywords:** leadership in Iran, transformational leadership, culture, paternalistic leadership

### **1. Introduction**

Transformational leadership (TL) has been identified as the most highly valued among the contemporary leadership theories; however, much of the evidence of the effects of TL and how this leadership style is flourished comes from the Western context, and the question of whether the role of TL is relevant in non-Western settings, including the Iranian context is yet to be verified. Many studies on leadership in Iran have tested TL using Iranian samples, and the results of these studies indicate that TL is beneficial to better follower performance outcomes in Iran just as in Western societies (e.g., Abbasi and Zamani-Miandashti, 2013; Khalili, 2016). However, the majority of the studies have focused on the main effects of TL without considering how cultural forces relevant to Iran influence the choice of transformational behaviors and the effects of TL. The studies also lack insights on whether antecedent-oriented research on TL is extendable to Iran and whether the consequences of leaders' transformational behavior in Iran are woven

and mediated through processes that have been outlined in the mainstream TL literature. Moreover, the existing research lacks clarity in terms of whether the understanding, or meaning, of core concepts/components of the TL theory is the same as posited in the theory. There are a few studies that offer a brief assessment of the relevance of Western leadership thought in the Asian context, but these reviews are inconclusive concerning the applicability of TL in Iran in that they provide an overview of all mainstream leadership theories focusing mainly on evidence emanating from China (Liden, 2012).

Iran is geographically located in the Middle East, but its culture is closer to that of its eastern neighbors in Asia such as India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand (Javidan and Dastmalchian, 2003). Despite being an Islamic country, Iran is culturally distinct from its middle eastern neighbors (Yeganeh and Su, 2007), which may be attributed to its unique historical, linguistic and racial identities (Ali and Amirshahi, 2002). The country is an understudied region with regards to literature on leadership, and there is still a dearth of rigorous academic research. Although TL is considered as one of the most important leadership styles contributing to positive employee and organizational outcomes such as creativity, innovation and performance, but the question of whether TL theory can be applied in Iran and it leads to the same benefits observed in other contexts and if not which components of the theory are (not) applicable. This study offers a comprehensive review of the extant research on TL in Iran and deepens our understanding of the generalizability of TL to a different cultural setting by providing important insights into this topic in one of the less examined contexts (Iran). The paper will not only advance a comprehensive understanding of this leadership approach in Iran, but will also offer important avenues for TL research in other countries with similar cultural characteristics.

## **2. The Universality of TL**

There have been differences among leadership researchers regarding the universal effectiveness of leadership theories and their cultural specificity. Some support the universal view based on the argument that all leaders perform similar functions, so core leadership processes should be similar across societies (Bass, 1997). Empirical evidence partly supports the notion of the generalizability of TL across cultures. For example, research coming from Asia shows that there is a significant positive effect of TL on job satisfaction (Voon et al., 2011); organizational

commitment (Yucel et al., 2014); motivation (Graves et al., 2013); and empowerment (Gill et al., 2009). These studies lend credence to the generalizability of TL by showing that such leader behaviors may be as equally effective in nurturing positive employee outcomes in Asia as in Western societies.

The other view asserts that culture has a great influence on leadership (e.g. Dorfman and Howell, 1988; House et al., 2004). A substantial volume of literature has accumulated in support of the later view that shows evidence of cultural impacts on TL and its effectiveness. For instance, Casimir et al. (2006) reported differences in the effects of TL on trust between Australian and Chinese followers. Likewise, Javidan and Carl (2004) found differences in TL behavior in samples of two culturally different countries, Canada and Iran. In a study on relationships between TL and culture value dimensions, uncertainty avoidance (UA) was found to have a negative relationship with TL (Ergeneli et al., 2007), which supports the differing effects of cultural forces on leadership.

### **3. Iranian Cultural Context and TL**

Iran is a country that ranks high on power distance (PD), UA, and collectivism and scores low on masculinity and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1983). The characteristics of TL are likely to fit better with some of these cultural dimensions than others. For example, transformational leaders focus on aligning followers' personal values with collective goals and a new vision (Avolio and Bass, 1988), which is more in tune with the collectivist values of Iranian culture, characterized by the strong tendency to see oneself from a holistic perspective and keep the interests of the collective above personal priorities (Hofstede, 1980). Likewise, transformational leaders' keen interest in employee participation, empowerment and the mentoring and development of subordinates (Bass and Avolio, 1994) should fit with feminine values of inclusiveness and person-orientation.

But Iran, as a society, is also high on PD, which tends towards directive forms of leadership through goal-setting and control mechanisms. A hierarchical and directive approach to leading people is less compatible with TL as such leaders attempt to intellectually stimulate followers by

challenging them to re-examine and rethink their assumptions regarding their work, which are types of conduct typically associated with low PD values (Kirkman et al., 2009).

Moreover, Iran is high on UA values, which seem to be inconsistent with TL (Ergeneli et al., 2007). In societies high on UA values, members engage in greater risk-avoiding behaviors. Contrarily, transformational leaders have a strong quest for creativity and change and often encourage their followers to engage in a certain amount of risk-taking. However, there is disagreement about whether TL/charismatic leadership is compatible with high or low UA values. Referring to the strong preference for visionary leaders in Iran, Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003) argue that the preference for such leadership seems to be rooted in the Iranian culture of high UA values. Further, Iran is low on long-term orientation, which suggests that it has a strong preference to preserve its traditions and norms, which is not compatible with the focus of TL to challenge the status quo.

#### **4. An Overview of the Existing Studies**

##### **4.1 Direct effects of TL**

As most leadership theories have been developed based on Western data and thinking, this raises questions about the applicability of TL in other cultural contexts (Blunt, 1997; Dastmalchian et al., 2001; Tsui, 2006). Studies coming from the Western context show that TL has positive effects on outcomes at both individual and organizational level. For example, TL has been found to have beneficial effects on organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Emery and Barker, 2007), psychological empowerment (Dust et al., 2014) employee creativity (Herrmann and Felfe, 2013), and organizational learning and innovation (García-Morales et al., 2012).

Studies based on Iranian samples have reported similar beneficial effects of TL on individual-level outcomes such as increased job satisfaction (Sayadi, 2016), high degree of psychological empowerment (Allameh et al., 2012), and employee creativity (Teymournejad and Elghaei, 2016). Other studies have also shown that TL is conducive to the organizational level outcomes. For instance, TL was found to be positively related to organizational identity (Ali et al., 2019), organizational innovation (Mokhber et al., 2015), and organizational learning, knowledge management and organizational performance (Noruzy et al., 2013; Abbasi and Zamani-

Miandashti, 2013). These findings are consistent with what has been previously found in Western societies, which shows that TL theory is as relevant in Iran as in many western and non-western settings. However, these findings cannot be conclusive as the number of studies in the first place is not substantial, and the majority of the existing studies have focused on outcomes at the organizational level to the neglect of the individual level of analysis.

In addition, Javidan and Carl (2004) carried out a comparative study among Iranian and Canadian managers to identify the differences and similarities in their leadership styles. They found that both Canadian and Iranian leadership comprise a charismatic/transformational leader with a mental map, who shares a new pattern, has a global viewpoint, is passionate, and is a reliable communicator. However, they also found that Iranian managers' ratings are significantly lower than those of the Canadian managers. This implies that the behaviors representing transformational leadership are meaningful across Iran and Western countries, but their enactment and behavioral manifestations are different.

#### **4.2 Mediators of TL effects**

Researchers have paid a lot of attention to the role of mediators in understating the effects of TL on both individual and organizational level outcomes. At the individual-level, past studies have examined the mediating role of psychological empowerment (Krishnan, 2012), political skills (Mencil et al., 2016), trust in the supervisor (Braun et al., 2013) and satisfaction of followers' basic needs (Kovjanic et al., 2012). With regard to the Iranian context, we only found a few articles which examined the role of mediators. For example, Bahmannia et al. (2013) found a sequential mediation by interpersonal trust and psychological empowerment in the relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity. Likewise, Salajeghe and Faramarzi (2016) reported the mediation effect of political skills in the relationship between TL and job satisfaction and Zeinabadi and Rastegarpour (2010) found perceived procedural justice to partly mediate the relationship between TL and trust in the leader.

Regarding mediators at the organizational level of analysis, we noted similar results in both the western and Iranian contexts. For instance, transformational leadership has been found to improve organizational performance through organizational learning and innovation (García-

Morales et al., 2012), and organizational agility (Aurélio de Oliveira et al., 2012). Our review shows that TL improves performance through innovation and organizational learning (Sayadi et al., 2016); organizational innovation through knowledge management (Asgarnezhad Nouri et al., 2016; Aminbeidokhti et al., 2016), and it enhances organizational agility through organizational creativity (Veisesh and Eghbali, 2014). We also found certain examples of cross-level effects in Iran, which have also been previously examined in other contexts. For example, Zahedbabelan et al. (2017) found that TL had a positive and direct and indirect effect on employees' commitment to change through organizational justice. Such mediators at the organizational level of the analysis indicate that the effects of TL in Iran are also woven through the same mechanisms that have been conceptualized and tested in the Western context.

We found certain subtle differences as well that may occur due to the role of cultural values such as national culture and organizational culture. For example, a comparative study by Afshari and Gibson (2015) between Iran and Australia indicated that idealized influence, which is a part of transformational leadership, has a significant effect on the development of organizational commitment through identified motivation in Iran, whereas this relationship is non-significant in the Australian manufacturing organization.

### **4.3 Moderators of TL effects**

Previous literature suggests that the effects of TL on outcomes are contingent on certain factors. In this regard, the differing effects of TL in different contexts has been attributed to the differences in cultural values and practices. Researchers in Iran have examined the role of certain moderators such as emotional intelligence (Khalili, 2017), organizational support (Mokhber et al., 2018), and supportive climate (Khalili, 2016) in the TL effects. These studies support the existence of such moderators that strengthen the relationship between the transformational and outcomes in various cultural settings; however, the differences in the relationship between TL and outcomes that have been found between Iran and Western countries can be explained by the role of moderators such as cultural variables (e.g., PD and UA). Although cultural values have not been tested as moderators in reality, but we assume that they may influence such relationships. For instance, Abbasi (2017) studied the effect of TL on employee change readiness with bureaucratic structure as a moderator. It was found that when the moderation of the

bureaucratic structure was added to the model, it eliminated the effect of TL on employee change readiness. This indicates that TL is less effective in organizations with high formality and centralization, which typify Iranian organizations (Nazarian and Atkinson, 2013). Past research suggests that bureaucratic structures are more prevalent in high PD societies (Jonsson et al., 2011; Michaels et al., 1996).

#### **4.4 Antecedents of TL**

The antecedent variables have drawn immense attention in TL research, but antecedent-oriented TL research is scant in the Iranian context. Nevertheless, a small body of research has focused on the individual and contextual antecedents of TL. A few studies have examined the role of emotional intelligence as a TL antecedent (Allameh et al., 2015; Dizgah and Keshavarz, 2015) that is consistent with mainstream TL research (Clarke, 2010; Barbuto and Burbach, 2006; Kim and Kim, 2017). Similarly, another study has shown spiritual quotient to positively relate with TL (Dargahi et al., 2017), which seems to be unique to the Iranian context as in previous literature the role of the leader's spirituality has been seldom considered in TL emergence (Klenke, 2005). Apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Javidan and Carl, 2004), the role of cultural characteristics have received sparse attention in TL research. These authors found TL behavior to be more pronounced among higher-level managers in Canada than in Iran although they did not formally examine the national culture – TL linkage and used country as a proxy for culture.

#### **5. Discussion**

Although there is limited TL research in Iran, the results show considerable similarities with findings emerging from other contexts with regards to which factors contribute to the emergence of this leadership and how it affects outcomes. These findings however are not conclusive because the role of cultural characteristics in the emergence of TL and its effects has received sparse attention. On the face of it, support for TL in Iran can be partly attributed to its national cultural values of high UA and in-group collectivism. Based on the finding of Newman and Butler (2014), transformational leadership is positively associated with high UA and collectivism and negatively related to high PD. This is consistent with the assertion by Javidan and Dastmalchian



(2003) that the high preference for visionary leadership among Iranian managers can be linked to society's high UA.

But at the same time, Iran like other eastern nations is a paternalistic-PD society, where hierarchy and nurturance coexist together (e.g. Aycan et al., 2000). Leaders in such societies perform a dual role by combining strong discipline and control with benevolence in their relationship with their subordinates (Farh and Cheng, 2000). A study by Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003) showed that employees in Iran expect their leaders to be caring and compassionate in applying the levers of power. This paradox of authority and benevolence questions the applicability of TL in Iran, because the PD aspect of paternalism is inconsistent with TL while benevolence is somehow related to the humanistic aspect of TL (cf, Mustafa and Lines, 2012). This apparently endorses some of the recent voices that paternalistic leadership is more relevant in such societies (Aycan, 2006; Farh et al., 2008). This however does not reject the compatibility of TL with the paternalistic characteristics of Iran because people in Iran idealize several historical characters for their valor and heroism and view certain people in authority as archetypes (cf, Yeganeh and Su, 2007), which offers a glimpse of the relevance of TL. Nevertheless, it is important to examine whether TL has predictive power over and above paternalistic leadership.

It is, however, important to note that the country scores on cultural values and practices are somewhat different. For example, Iranian cultural practices are distinguished by high male orientation and low UA in contrast with its low masculine and high UA values. There is a similar inconsistency for long-term orientation practices and values, i.e. they prefer high long-term orientation, but the current practices manifest a short-term orientation (House et al., 2004). It is yet to be explained whether the manifestation of TL and its effects are linked to cultural practices or values prevalent in the Iranian society. Previous research shows differences regarding whether cultural practices or values determine behaviors. For example, Frese (2015) asserts that cultural practices rather than cultural values are directly related to behavior because cultural practices represent the shared perceptions of how people routinely behave in a culture whereas values characterize shared ideals among members of a society and are abstract in nature. There are, however, other studies that show the importance of both cultural and individual-level values in

shaping behaviors (Bardi and Schwartz, 2003; Taras et al., 2010). In view of the above, it is important to disentangle the effects of cultural practices from values in predicting TL.

Another important issue that is worth consideration is the similarity or non-equivalence of the TL components in Iran and other cultures. This has not been sufficiently addressed in the earlier comparative studies. Hence, the relationships observed may reflect systematic biases in individuals' interpretations and responses and may challenge the meaningfulness of the results of earlier cross-country research on the occurrence and effects TL in Iran.

## **6. Suggestions for Future Research**

Although substantial interest has been shown over the past few years in TL oriented research in Iran, more research is needed on the emergence and effects of this leadership. We still know little about how/ why managers engage in transformational leadership behaviors, under which conditions these behaviors are more/less effective, via which routes such leadership weaves its effects and whether the efficacy of such mediating mechanisms is contingent on any other factors. So the researchers should propose meaningful moderators specific to the Iranian context. Doing this will demonstrate the importance of culture in altering the relationship between TL and employee and organizational level outcomes. Likewise, it is important to explore underlying mechanisms that offer different explanations for the same relationships observed elsewhere. Uncovering the specific boundary conditions and mechanisms that attune to the Iranian culture will offer a deeper understanding of when and how TL will lead to increased benefits in the Iranian organizations.

Moreover, exploring the unique and combined effects of cultural dimensions in predicting TL and how these behave as boundary conditions in TL effects are important. Each cultural dimension captures a key aspect of culture, but at the same time, they have parallel/conflicting effects (Schwartz, 1992). It is therefore important to examine if they mutually reinforce/weaken each other in producing interactive effects that go beyond their individual main effects and whether one or two dimensions compensate for the lack of another. Testing such effects is specifically important because TL is compatible with certain cultural dimensions and inconsistent with others.

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