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Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual paper aims to explore the leadership of Korean middle managers in a cross-cultural context.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents three propositions in relation to perceived charisma, individualized consideration and inspirational communication of Korean transformational leadership at home and overseas, especially in comparison with Anglo-Saxon countries such as North America and the UK.

Findings – Following the notion of implicit theory of leadership, this paper argues that the effectiveness of Korean leadership may depend on cultural dimensions such as collectivism/individualism and power distance.

Research limitations/implications – In this paper, the perspective of transformational leadership with its universal appeal to various cultures in examining the effectiveness of Korean leadership at home and overseas has been adapted.

Practical implications – This illustration of the Korean leadership in a cross-cultural context sheds light on the challenges facing the Korean management in global contexts.

Originality/value – Despite significant ongoing investment abroad by Korean conglomerates, relatively little has been written on Korean leadership in cross-cultural contexts. This paper could stimulate further studies in this area.

Keywords International business, Cross-cultural

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Among the newly industrialized countries, South Korea (Korea hereafter) has achieved the most remarkable rate of economic growth (Kim and Bae, 2004). During the 1970s and 1980s, the *chaebol* (Korean conglomerates) and the Korean economy grew at a rapid rate, assisted by an authoritarian state (Shin and Chang, 2003). Many Korean companies recognize the importance of developing human resources (Song *et al.*, 2009) due to a paucity of natural resources and a high population density in Korea. The efficacy of the Korean model and the economic development associated with it (Shin and Chang, 2003) is also due to highly committed Korean workers with a strong work ethic (Yang, 2014a), who ensure some of the longest working hours in the world (OECD, 2008).

Along with rapid domestic industrialization and economic growth, large Korean companies expanded overseas, including in developed Western countries such as North America and the UK, which are the focal point of this paper. Korea has become one of the largest Asian investors in the USA (US Department of Commerce, 2014) and the UK (Glover and Wilkinson, 2007). Such international expansion often occurred with the

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objective of acquiring technology and management skills (Park, 2010), requiring collaborative cooperation between the domestic and overseas offices. However, Korean companies quickly encountered challenges in managing foreign affiliates, such as expatriate training and two-way knowledge transfer (Rowley and Paik, 2009). Some overseas operations were even closed, although poor employee relations may not have been the only reasons for this (Lansbury *et al.*, 2006).

Alongside the literature on how human resource management practices are implemented in Korean-owned foreign subsidiaries and how these affect the day-to-day work of employees and managers (Rowley *et al.*, 2004), it is also important to consider how followers perceive Korean managers' leadership. Existing studies highlight the importance of leadership in relation to employee trust, motivation and commitment (Jung *et al.*, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2011). In addition, insofar as a leader is a linchpin between an organization and employees, to understand how Korean managers are perceived, could give us insights into the overall effectiveness of Korean management overseas.

Many studies support the finding that transformational leadership is an effective leadership style in the Korean context (Hur *et al.*, 2011). Research also argues that transformational leadership has universal appeal across cultures (Bass and Riggio, 2006; House *et al.*, 2004), although its interpretation or realization may differ (Casimir *et al.*, 2006; Dickson *et al.*, 2003). We explore the characteristics of transformational leadership in Korea and how these may be perceived in different cultural contexts, considering dimensions such as collectivism/individualism and power distance, which are particularly relevant to leadership. Amongst Hosftede's five well-known cultural dimensions, power distance, with its consideration of authority, has particular resonance with leadership (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). The dimension of collectivism/individualism is also important for leadership and the leader's role to motivate and manage a team of followers (Yang, 2014b), particularly in relation to transformational leadership.

Differences in domestic and overseas employee attitudes toward their Korean managers, and subsequently their Korean organizations, are quite intriguing, given the higher level of work loyalty in Korea (Yang, 2014a). Thus, we believe that our conceptual explorations on leadership could shed some light on the challenges Korean leaders face in cross-cultural contexts. Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to compare the meanings of (transformational) leadership in Korean and Anglo-Saxon contexts. In so doing, we aim to contribute to the literature on implicit leadership, especially with respect to the persistent challenges that many Korean multinational companies (MNCs) face when managing foreign staff. This paper contributes to the growing discussion on the cross-cultural meaning of transformational leadership by illustrating how *Korean transformational leadership* may be perceived differently by subordinates at home and overseas. We also highlight the challenges facing Korean managers in translating highly contextual, collectivist and high power distance behavioral manifestations to other cultures.

Regarding the structure of the paper, we first discuss the notion of transformational leadership and culture in areas such as collectivism and power distance. We then present propositions that compare the perceptions of important aspects of transformational leadership, including charisma, individual consideration and inspirational communication between Korea and Anglo-Saxon countries. Further considerations are also discussed in the last section.

2. Transformational leadership and culture

2.1 Effectiveness of transformational leadership

The full-range theory of leadership (Bass, 1985) identifies two renowned leadership styles, i.e. transformational and transactional leadership. Transactional leaders use rewards as positive reinforcement when standards and objectives are reached and punishment and negative feedback if problems occur. In contrast, transformational leaders are able to strongly influence their followers to transcend self-interest and release their full performance potential toward the organization's goals (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders align team members' goals and values and foster collective optimism, team efficacy and identification with the team (Bass and Riggio, 2006). One distinctive characteristic that differentiates transformational leadership from other leadership styles is its active involvement with and engagement in the *personal values* of followers (Jung *et al.*, 2009). Empirical research has identified the dimensions that pertain to the concept of transformational leadership as charisma, individualized consideration and inspirational communication (Avolio, 1999). We explore each of these in detail below.

Idealized influence refers to a leader's charismatic actions that are centered on values, beliefs and a deep sense of mission, motivating their followers to do more than they believe they are able to (Antonakis *et al.*, 2003). Charismatic components contribute most significantly to the perception of what constitutes effective leadership style (Matveev and Lvina, 2007). Transformational leaders build one-on-one relationships and adapt to the individual needs of followers. They pay a high degree of attention or *individualized consideration* to the specific needs of followers (Modassir and Singh, 2008). Transformational leaders are frequently perceived as mentors and coaches (Bass, 1985). Supportive leadership expresses concern for followers by paying attention to individual needs. Supportive leaders tend to direct their behavior toward the satisfaction of subordinates' needs, display concern for subordinates' overall welfare and create a psychologically supportive work environment (House, 1996).

Inspirational motivation refers to the leader's ability to articulate values and goals which drive followers to transcend their own self-interests. Transformational leaders offer a purpose that transcends short-term goals and focuses upon higher-order intrinsic needs (Judge and Piccolo, 2004). Such leadership hinges upon the leader's ability to construct messages in a coherent fashion and to engage in effective communication practices. The process or style by which the message is communicated appears to be as important as the content (Matveev and Lvina, 2007).

Transformational leadership is acknowledged to increase followers' trust, realign followers' personal values and make them consistent with their leader's espoused values and create a sense of reverence and loyalty, as well as trust and value congruence, for followers (Jung *et al.*, 2009). After reviewing five previous meta-analyses, Wang *et al.* (2011) found that transformational leadership is consistently positively related to various follower outcomes (e.g. task and contextual performance, motivation, organizational commitment and job satisfaction).

2.2 Culture

Cross-cultural leadership research has found that, while some aspects of leadership are universally endorsed, many leadership practices and expectations vary systematically and considerably across societal cultures (Casimir *et al.*, 2006; Dickson *et al.*, 2003).

Culture can be perceived as a form of collective mental programming, and there are five independent dimensions of national culture that represent "fundamental problems of society" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 1). These dimensions are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism (collectivism), masculinity (femininity) and future orientation (long-term versus short-term).

Of these, we consider power distance and collectivism to be particularly relevant to the leadership discussion, as they concern notions of power and self (House *et al.*, 2004). In addition, while transformational leaders emphasize individual team members' goals and values to foster team efficacy (Bass and Riggio, 2006), cultural dimensions of collectivism/individualism in relation to the view toward a team, and of power distance in relation to the view of authority, become much more relevant. Furthermore, Confucianism, as another distinctive cultural aspect to consider for Korea, scores high for in-group collectivism (Gupta and Hanges, 2004). Confucianism also emphasizes hierarchy and contends that each individual should be aware of his/her position in the social system (Casimir *et al.*, 2006), accentuating hard work, respect for elders, strong family ties and passion for learning (Rowley *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, our comparative exploration of transformational leadership between Korea and Anglo-Saxon countries, including the USA, Australia, Canada and the UK, justifies our focus on the cultural dimensions of collectivism and power distance.

Power distance refers to the "different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). Dickson *et al.* (2003) observed that, in hierarchical societies, subordinates are more reluctant to challenge their superiors and leaders are expected to exhibit patterns of authoritative behavior. Korea has a higher power distance index than Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g. power distance index: 60 = Korea versus 40 = USA/35 = UK: Hofstede, 1980).

Individualism versus collectivism is about the "integration of individuals into primary groups" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). Collectivists are more inclined to respond to situations with restraint of their own intentions for the greater welfare of the group. Individualistic societies, on the other hand, are egocentric, autonomous, separate, self-contained and independent (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Anglo-Saxon cultures emphasize individualism (Gupta and Hanges, 2004), whereas Asian societies are high on group-centered collectivism (e.g. individualism index: 18 = Korea versus 91 = USA/89 = UK: Hofstede, 1980, 2001).

Related to collectivism and individualism, the dimensions of high- and low-context cultures (Hall, 1976) have been repeatedly referred to by scholars studying intercultural communication in the global workplace. High-context cultures (collectivism) convey messages through non-verbal cues and share meaning implicitly. Here, the listener is well acquainted with the context. Low-context cultures (individualism) utilize low levels of programmed information, and thus the explicit code or actual words are required. In this case, culture is a system of knowledge that allows people to know how to communicate with individuals from different cultures and how to interpret their behaviors (Gudykunst, 2004). Korea is high context and Anglo-Saxon countries are low context in their communication.

Overall, Korea can mainly be characterized by a high power distance, high in-group collectivism and high context, whereas Anglo-Saxon countries have lower power distance, high individualism and low context.

2.3 Leadership in different cultures

The implicit theory of leadership (Lord and Maher, 1991) implies that, at the most fundamental level, leadership is an outcome of the social cognitive processes used by individuals to label others. Therefore, even though the prototype of leadership is transformational (Matveev and Lvina, 2007), expectations regarding the best way to lead are culturally endorsed (House *et al.*, 2004). For example, leaders' indirect communication to avoid damaging group harmony is viewed as supportive by employees in Asia (Chun *et al.*, 2009), while, in Anglo-Saxon cultures, more direct task-orientated communication is appreciated. Similarly, as high power distance cultures associate leadership with strong appreciation and status (Steinmetz *et al.*, 2011), transformational leadership tends to be directive in nature, whereas in cultures with low power distance, it tends to be more participative (Dickson *et al.*, 2003).

It is important to match leadership styles with national cultures to sway employee attitudes such as satisfaction with supervisor and organizational commitment (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2007). In line with our discussion, we will compare the meanings of transformational leadership between Korea and Anglo-Saxon cultures and, ultimately, the effectiveness of *Korean transformational leadership* in an Anglo-Saxon cultural context in the following section. In keeping with the implicit theory arguments illustrating different cultural expectations and interpretations of leaders' behaviors, we label cultural meaning or quality of transformation leadership in Korea as "Korean transformational leadership".

3. Transformational leadership in Korea and Anglo-Saxon countries

As the transformational leadership theory is characterized as a neocharismatic theory (House and Aditya, 1997), charismatic components and/or actions contribute most strongly to the perception of what constitutes effective leadership style (Antonakis *et al.*, 2003; Matveev and Lvina, 2007) in the Anglo-Saxon culture. Transformational leaders are perceived as having the competencies required to handle difficult situations (Keller, 2006), and have a relatively closer relationship with their followers (Smith and Peterson, 1988). Likewise, Americans make charismatic attributes dependent on the extent to which leaders show prototypical leader behaviors, whereas other collectivists, such as Turks, make charismatic attributes dependent upon company performance (Ensari and Murphy, 2003). Therefore, even though it is not explicit, we can safely assume that the notion of transformational leadership is realized via certain personalities that appear to be *charismatic* by followers in Anglo-Saxon countries. In fact, most theories of transformational leadership in Western contexts use "charisma" and "idealized influence" interchangeably (Avolio, 1999; House and Aditya, 1997; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1996), suggesting the idealized influence of individual leaders with appealing personalities.

Moreover, senior leaders are less often seen as the sole source of organizational success, and are more frequently held accountable for its failures in collectivistic societies (Dickson *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, we might expect that the idealized influence of transformational leaders or managers in Korea may not necessarily be realized by certain personalities *per se*. While the correlation between transformational leadership and leader effectiveness is notably high in Korea (Hur *et al.*, 2011), power distance may influence the inclination to delegate because this cultural dimension is associated with a tendency for leaders to autocratically retain power (Van de Vliert and Smith, 2004). As

a consequence, respect for individuals in leadership positions is high in Korea, and Korean followers may have a greater tendency to develop a positive perception of their superior's leadership style (Chun *et al.*, 2009; Jung *et al.*, 2009).

As the family metaphor is one of the core characteristics of authority in Korean organizations (Raz, 2009), paternalistic authority reflects the role of a parent, with an obligation to provide support and protection to those under their care (Aycan, 2001). In a similar vein, business relationships in Korea are likely to be emotion-based in dyadic relationships, and Koreans place particular emphasis on emotional ties with others (Lee *et al.*, 2012). Korean managers like to preserve the appearance of care for their trusting subordinates by showing concern for their welfare (Kim *et al.*, 2008); benevolence is congruent with the notion of paternalism in high power distant and collectivist cultures (Wasti *et al.*, 2007). However, as the management theory comes largely from North America, it fails to emphasize this paternalistic style of leadership (Behrens, 2010).

Koreans' deference to paternalistic top-down decision-making (Hargittay and Kleiner, 2005) can also be explained by the teacher's role in the Confucian tradition, according to which teachers/masters are considered to be dispensers of knowledge and molders of students' character (Shin and Koh, 2005). This high power distance trait in the Korean society is less inclined to endorse participative leadership (House *et al.*, 2004), whereas the ideal leader in Anglo-Saxon countries is someone who encourages participation through delegation (Hoppe and Bhagat, 2007). At work in Korea, managers assume the role of master and decision-maker, while subordinates, assuming the role of students, submit to their seniors' accumulated knowledge within the organization.

While a dominating style is frequently used with subordinates in Korean organizations (Lee, 2002), this form of leadership may well appear to be too autocratic (top-down decision-making) overseas. Leaders in Asian countries have a tendency to maintain social distance between themselves and their followers (Liden, 2012). Similarly, research found a considerably higher climate of openness and a lower climate of rigidity and control in Canadian organizations than in Korean firms (Dastmalchian *et al.*, 2000). It results then that tight command and control by Korean expatriates ran contrary to the expectations of local workforces in the UK settings (Glover and Wilkinson, 2007) and lead to poor employee relations in Hyundai Canada (Lansbury *et al.*, 2006).

In addition, while the idealized influence of transformational leadership in Korea is based on a senior position held by a leader with a benevolent paternalistic management style rather than a distinctive leader personality, this type of Korean leadership may be perceived as inappropriate by the local workforce in many Anglo Saxon countries (Zou and Lansbury, 2009). Studies have also shown that Americans value unique visual representations (compared to common ones) more than Koreans do (Kinias *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, while Steve Jobs' personality was extremely passionate and uncompromising, and, at the same time, ruthless, wholly self-centered and that he was judged as a heartless manipulator of those around him (Isaacson, 2012), it made him and Apple unprecedentedly successful in an individualistic culture. Leaders with too sharp edges like Steve Jobs may gradually lose such traits due to the societal intolerance for such characteristics in East Asian countries (Zhang *et al.*, 2012).

Leaders with a more ordinary personality, on the other hand, may be perceived as too bland and lacking in charisma in individualistic Western countries. Similarly, American students thought Korean teaching assistants (TAs) lacked confidence and even

considered them as incompetent, whereas the Korean TAs were culturally programmed to present themselves as modest so that their Americans students did not lose face (Tyler, 1995; Tyler and Davies, 1990). Therefore, our first set of propositions is set out below:

P1a. The idealized influence of transformational leadership is strongly associated with the charismatic personalities of individual leaders in the Anglo-Saxon countries with their high individualism and low power distance.

P1b. The idealized influence of transformational leadership is strongly associated with benevolent paternalistic management in Korea with its high collectivism and high power distance.

P1c. The idealized influence of Korean transformation leadership may not be as effective in Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Transformational leaders also pay a high degree of attention or individualized consideration to the specific needs of followers (Modassir and Singh, 2008) to build confidence in their subordinates (Podsakoff *et al.*, 1996). While an important cultural value of individualists is that feeling positive about themselves is crucial (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) as is the focus on single individuals, individualized considerations of transformational leadership in Anglo-Saxon cultures help subordinates to deal with stress and other emotional problems in the workplace (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). Leadership behavior for individualized consideration is to create a supportive environment of warmth, friendliness and helpfulness (House, 1996; Judge and Piccolo, 2004) based on *individual needs*. Accordingly, individualistic subordinates may prefer autonomy and opportunities for personal growth (Hofstede, 1980).

However, individualized consideration in Korea is closely related to fulfilling the need for affiliation or group cohesion (Javidan *et al.*, 2004). In Korean organizations, team building is considered to be one of the most important activities (Cho *et al.*, 2005), and Korean employees pay attention to constructing relationships, considering mutuality important, as it underpins the relationship-building process (Lee and Trim, 2008). Collectivist Korean culture considers competence to be secondary to personal attributes (Adler and Jelinek, 1986), whereas individualistic cultures emphasize individual's abilities, as a person's identity is largely based on personal accomplishments (Doney *et al.*, 1998).

The importance of human relations in Asia, including Korea, is described in Haraguchi's study (1995). Examining Herzberg's two-factor model in Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese companies, Haraguchi claims that human relationships should be considered as a third factor, distinct from either motivational or hygiene factors. (East) Asians tend to devote time to assessing contextual factors, such as social status or personal preferences and attitudes (Nguyen, 2005). Confucianism also stresses the cultivation of an individual's mind rather than the development of technical skills (Kim *et al.*, 2008).

Transformational leadership plays a critical positive role in enhancing group effectiveness and cohesiveness in Korean organizations, which exhibit a high group collectivist tendency (Jung *et al.*, 2009). Korean managers far prefer warm and harmonious interactions with their subordinates (House *et al.*, 2004; Shin *et al.*, 2011),

and group harmony has been linked to opportunities for a smooth, conflict-free interpersonal and inter-organizational relationship (Choi *et al.*, 2008).

However, the correlation between transformational leadership (based on group unit exchange) and leader-member exchange (LMX; based on one-to-one exchange) is significantly more positive when individualism is high than when it is low (Liden, 2012). This may mean that individualistic subordinates appreciate those who pay attention to them in a dyad rather than as a whole group. In a similar vein, studies have shown that the independent self (in individualistic cultures) leads people to value more personally oriented values (i.e. self-acceptance and financial success) and less socially oriented ones (i.e. community feeling and social recognition) (Kim *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, leaders who provide individualized support with high performance expectations and ambitious goals (Magnusson *et al.*, 2008) have more influence in cultures that are individualistic and low in power distance (Engelen *et al.*, 2014).

Providing individualized support is, however, unusual in high power distance cultures due to the natural distance between superiors and subordinates (Carl *et al.*, 2004), and such behavior sits uneasily with collectivist values because it can disrupt group harmony (Triandis, 2001). Furthermore, the supervisor-subordinate relationship in East Asian countries covers the non-work exchange after office hours through home visits or other social functions (Zhang *et al.*, 2012), which may not be perceived as (legitimate professional) individualized consideration in most Anglo-Saxon countries. Therefore, as research suggests that Korean leaders may need to focus more on LMX relationships for individualistic US employees (Lee *et al.*, 2014), even though there is less concern about the quality of their LMX relationships in collectivist Korean cultures (Erdogan and Liden, 2006), our second set of propositions is set out below:

P2a. Individualized consideration of transformational leadership is strongly associated with attention to single individual needs in Anglo-Saxon countries with their high individualism.

P2b. Individualized consideration of transformational leadership is strongly associated with attention to group harmony in Korea with its high collectivism.

P2c. Individualized consideration of Korean transformation leadership may not be as effective in Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Many aspects of managerial work requires communication and coordination (Pearson and Chatterjee, 2003), and the effectiveness of transformational leadership depends at least partly on the leader's ability to engage competently in interpersonal communication and to use an appropriate communication style (Oguri and Gudykunst, 2002). National culture orientation and intercultural communication skills tend to impact on both the leadership framework and transformational leadership (Gandolfi, 2012). As the style through which the message is communicated appears to be as important as the content (Matveev and Lvina, 2007), transformational leaders are expected to *articulate* ambitious goals in Anglo-Saxon countries (Bass, 1985; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990). In this regard, being visionary may be displayed in an assertive way in Western cultures, whereas, in Eastern cultures, the communication of a vision should be expressed in a subtle manner (Dickson *et al.*, 2012). American professionals also show greater appreciation for strategic leadership with more highly developed and explicit definitions than their Korean counterparts (Shin *et al.*, 2011).

However, Confucian collectivism tends to pay close attention to relationships and avoids showing disrespect to others through direct verbal communication (Tsui and Farh, 1997). Within collectivist and high-context cultures with well-defined relationships between individuals or organizations, less communication is needed compared to Western countries (Bstieler and Hemmer, 2008). Even when there are differences in perceptions, there is a strong tendency not to make differences too explicit, to avoid confrontation and instead to seek consensus (Kim and Slocum, 2008). In individualistic societies, on the other hand, disagreements are more openly expressed between the disagreeing parties (Hofstede, 2001).

Furthermore, Confucian leadership, which is in line with transformational leadership, emphasizes the practice of leadership and the idealized ethics of "being a gentleman" (Cheung and Chan, 2005; Lin *et al.*, 2013). For example, a leader who holds high moral standards and self-discipline tends to lead subordinates by example (Wu *et al.*, 2012).

Due to cultural differences, what constitutes adequate communication for Korean managers may be perceived somewhat differently by their foreign subordinates (Bstieler and Hemmer, 2008). Articulating a vision has more impact in individualistic cultures (Engelen *et al.*, 2014), and consultation generally plays a more positive role in the USA than in Korea (Lee *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, research shows that students from the USA prefer concrete experiences, while students from Korea prefer abstract conceptualization (Jaju *et al.*, 2002). This is likely to imply that Western subordinates may not fully understand implicit behavioral cues from Korean managers in communication, while Korean subordinates will not have a problem with them.

Leaders need to be aware that an identical message and channel of communication may trigger varied responses among diverse followers (Gandolfi, 2012). Korean leaders' behavioral cues may be subtle, and Korean subordinates are expected to interpret the contextual cues through gauging and checking, utilizing informal social gatherings and well-defined relationships (Raz, 2009; Yang, 2006). For example, Nam and Mowday (1993) found that Korean managers were more likely to take the blame personally for unit failure. However, foreign subordinates may fail to process the subtle cues of being responsible for the collective team and being an example as a leader. In Korean organizations overseas, the negative impact of cultural distance, including the language barrier, obstructs communication (Park, 2010) and impedes the development of relationships between local staff and their Korean managers (Glover and Wilkinson, 2007). Therefore, our third set of propositions is as follows:

P3a. Inspirational motivation of transformational leadership is strongly associated with fluent verbal articulation in Anglo-Saxon countries with their high individualism.

P3b. Inspirational motivation of transformational leadership is strongly associated with behavioral examples in Korea with its high collectivism.

P3c. Inspirational motivation of Korean transformation leadership may not be as effective in Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Table I illustrates comparisons of meanings of transformational leadership in the three dimensions of idealized influence, individualized consideration and inspirational motivation between Anglo-Saxon countries with low power distance and high

individualism and Korea with high power distance and high collectivism. The table also summarizes the propositions presented in this article.

4. Further discussion

In comparing the meanings of (transformational) leadership between Korea and Anglo-Saxon cultures, we contribute to the literature on implicit leadership by addressing the persistent challenges that many Korean MNCs face when managing foreign staff. With the propositions presented, we aim to stimulate future research on comparative leadership, not only between Korea and Anglo-Saxon countries but also in other cross-cultural settings. This paper also contributes to the ongoing research on the cross-cultural meaning of transformational leadership. At the same time, our exploration gives insights into the importance of implicit leadership as, while people from different cultural backgrounds might expect the same idea of leadership, the actual realization of that idea may be different. Finally, we highlight the challenges facing Korean managers in translating highly contextual, collectivist and high power distance behavioral manifestations to other cultures.

It is claimed that the exercise of transformational leadership is needed in international contexts (Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003), as managers who energize others with vision and mobilize commitment are more likely to keep employees from different cultures together (Woerkom and de Reuver, 2009). Transformational leadership is suggested to have a positive effect on leadership effectiveness across two such different cultures as the USA and Korea (Yammarino *et al.*, 2005), and everybody expects a leader to have some level of charisma (Behrens, 2010). However, we argue that the *realization* of transformational leadership may not be compatible in different cultural contexts. While the leadership literature, in general, has paid limited attention to the underlying psychological processes by which (transformational) leaders motivate followers (Yukl, 2006), we illustrate how *Korean transformational leadership* may be perceived (and therefore motivates subordinates) differently at home and overseas.

Due to cultural referents (Adler, 1997), behavioral scripts are in the form of deeply embedded templates that are taken for granted and unconsciously enacted (Johnson *et al.*, 2000). These deeply ingrained scripts often prevent an agent from comprehending the possibility of other behavioral scripts, and the alternatives are often seen as illegitimate, irrational or irrelevant, because they are not built on systematically similar core cultural tenets (Ahmadjian and Robinson, 2001). Traditional Korean legitimacy, including leadership, relies more on community-based and clan-like social bonds than on economic performance (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002; Yang, 2015). Foreign owners often tend to impose their own norms (Alakent and Lee, 2010), and Korean managerial

Table I. Comparative meaning of transformational leadership between Korea and Anglo-Saxon countries

Meaning of transformational leadership *depend on cultural contexts*	Anglo-Saxon countries *with low power distance and high individualism*	Korea *with high power distance and high collectivism*
Idealized influence	Leader's (charismatic) personalities	Benevolent paternalistic management
Individualized consideration	Based on individual needs	Based on group harmony
Inspirational motivation	Fluent verbal articulation	Behavioral examples

leadership style is likely to be imposed in Korean MNCs. However, employee commitment results from an assessment of the congruence between an individual's own values and beliefs and those of the organization (Swailes, 2002).

International managers have a job with international scope, whether in an expatriate assignment or in a job dealing with subordinates from different cultural backgrounds. The role of culture cannot be properly understood without understanding the contextual workplace aspects in which meaning-making processes occur and develop in non-automatic ways (Bjerregaard *et al.*, 2009). Research has supported the trainability of transformational leadership skills (Parry and Sinha, 2005) and cultural empathy, open-mindedness and social initiative, which are found to have a positive effect on transformational leadership (Woerkom and de Reuver, 2009). For example, multicultural awareness, including cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2003), can be stimulated by training and development and by enabling managers to gain experience in intercultural environments and projects (Woerkom and de Reuver, 2009).

Moreover, leadership adjustment, defined as the process of synchronization of incompatible work-related interaction routines (Festing and Maletzky, 2011), is a reciprocal process (House *et al.*, 2004). The outcome of adjustment is influenced by the nature of interpersonal relations between expatriates and local colleagues, in particular by power relations (Takeuchi, 2010). While power as a transformative influence is an aspect that is inherent in leadership, there is evidence that people from economically stronger and more developed countries are frequently perceived in a more positive way (Thorelli and Glowacka, 1995). Besides, leaders who belong to a minority group are more often evaluated negatively and perceived as less competent by their followers from the majority group (Ospina and Foldy, 2009). As the country of origin of the expatriate may play an important role, this highlights the challenges facing Korean leadership in relation to transformational leadership, especially with regard to charisma.

Given the importance of group values and the focus on collective interests by transformational leaders (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2007), individuals who have collective values will respond more favorably to transformational, as opposed to transactional, leadership (Takahashi *et al.*, 2012). Jung and Avolio (1999) compared the levels of idea generation in terms of culture and leadership styles. They concluded that, in individualistic cultures, people who work with transactional leaders generate more ideas than those who work with transformational leaders, but, in collectivist cultures, transformational leaders perform better. This finding suggests that relationships rather than transactions play an important role in collectivist cultures and vice-versa (Hoppe and Bhagat, 2007). Subsequently, Korean managers operating in individualistic societies might consider pursuing transactional leadership to be effective. Further research could explore such a hypothesis.

While transformational leadership has a positive impact on leader effectiveness in both the USA and Korea (Jung *et al.*, 2009), context constrains which behaviors are considered as prototypical (Liden and Antonakis, 2009). Cultures and social events shape leaders' traits and motives into categories with distinct characteristics (Riggio and Mumford, 2011), and leadership practices are an extension of a given country's traditions and are unique to that country (Marcoulides *et al.*, 1998). In other words, what is perceived as prototypical phenomena and an ongoing interpretation of transformational leadership by social actors in Korea may be distinctive to Korean

contexts. While more than 95 per cent of research on leadership describes North American leadership phenomena (Yukl, 2006; Zhang *et al.*, 2012), our conceptual exploration of Korean transformational leadership could stimulate further research to address this asymmetry in the creation of leadership knowledge between Western and non-Western societies (Zhang *et al.*, 2012).

Along the same line, with the growing number of Asian companies stepping up their economic activities in Western countries (Felfe and Yan, 2009), cultural similarities between Japan, China and Korea as part of a regional cluster are considerable (Rowley *et al.*, 2004). It is also argued that geographical and cultural proximity among these countries has led to the evolution of an Asian model of human resource management (Zhu *et al.*, 2007) and leadership style. Along this line, it would be interesting to examine how Korean MNCs have adapted and are perceived in these countries. For example, does Korean managerial leadership function better in such countries? Furthermore, do Japanese and Chinese MNCs encounter similar challenges when expanding overseas?

Finally, while we differentiate between the three dimensions of transformational leadership to simplify our arguments, we also note the strong correlations between these three dimensions. For example, one meta-analysis revealed that leaders who provide subordinates with individualized consideration also tend to be seen by subordinates as charismatic (Lowe *et al.*, 1996). Future research could empirically explore how these three dimensions correlate with one another within a single cultural context and cross-cultural contexts. While quantitative surveys could be used to measure correlations, initial investigation of the meanings or the realizations of each dimension of transformational leadership could be also conducted using in-depth interviews with both the leader and his/her subordinates. In addition to the cultural implications on leadership, further empirical research could also reveal a wide spectrum of the different impacts on leadership, such as size of the company, different stage of foreign entries and age and gender of both the leader and the subordinates.

5. Conclusion

Transferring managerial practices and leadership styles overseas is no easy task, no matter how successful they are at home. It is even more difficult when the home practice is in the form of high-context tacit knowledge that is embedded in multiple social and organizational layers. In this paper, we examined Korean transformational leadership at home and overseas to illustrate how home and local employees could perceive it differently. As we assessed the notion of the implicit leadership theory, we emphasized the awareness of the country-of-origin effect and the different cultural dimensions in the expansion of companies and the application of managerial leadership overseas. In light of the substantial expansion of Korean MNCs and their constant challenges in recruiting and retaining talented local staff, this paper provides both practitioners and academics with an overview of Korean managerial leadership and attitudes that ultimately affect the transfer of knowledge and skills between parent and host companies.

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