The Effects of Australian Tall Poppy Attitudes on American Value Based Leadership Theory

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Abstract. A survey study of twenty-two Australian CEOs and their subordinates assessed relationships between Australian leader motives, Australian value based leader behaviour, subordinate tall poppy attitudes and subordinate commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction (CEMS). On the whole, the results showed general support for value based leadership processes. Subsequent regression analyses of the second main component of Value Based Leadership Theory, value based leader behaviour, revealed that the collectivistic, inspirational, integrity and visionary behaviour sub-scales of the construct were positively related with subordinate CEMS. Although the hypothesis that subordinate tall poppy attitudes would moderate value based leadership processes was not clearly supported, subsequent regression analyses found that subordinate tall poppy attitudes were negatively related with perceptions of value based leader behaviour and CEMS. These findings suggest complex relationships between the three constructs, and the proposed model for the Australian context is accordingly amended. Overall, the research supports the need to consider cultural-specific attitudes in management development.

Keywords: Australia, cross-cultural management, leader-follower relationships, leadership, tall poppy attitudes, Value Based Leadership Theory

1. The effects of Australian tall poppy attitudes on American value based leadership theory

Almost all of the prevailing theories of leadership have come from American and Western European countries, reflecting the cultures of these countries. With the world migrating towards an increasingly global society (Alexander and Wilson, 1997), will these American and Western European leadership theories apply in other culturally different countries?

Recently, the need to better understand leadership processes in Australia was highlighted by The Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management skills (Karpin, 1995). The report exposed the inadequacy of the existing Australian leadership and management paradigm, suggesting that Australia lacked the leadership needed to provide Australia with an edge in the increasingly competitive global economy. Although the report highlighted the importance of understanding leadership processes, Midgley (1995) stressed the need to question the value of the extensive global leadership literature to Australia because the majority of this literature may not be applicable to the Australian culture. This is supported by studies that found that leadership processes are influenced by the culture in which the leadership process takes place (House, Wright and Aditya, 1997; Parry and Sarros, 1996).

The aim of this paper is two-fold. First, to provide the first empirical study in the Australian context of Value Based Leadership Theory, a theory developed in the United States (House, 1999). Second, to empirically test the argument that Australian cultural characteristics need to be taken into account when applying leadership theories developed outside the Australian context. In particular, it is argued that an Australian cultural characteristic, the tall poppy syndrome, will have a moderating effect on the relationship between a value based leader and his/her followers.

Value based leadership is defined as a relationship between a leader and one or more followers based on strongly internalised ideological values espoused by the leader and strong follower identification with these values (House, 1999). In other words, if the leader has values that appeal to the follower, the follower will be more motivated and committed in following the leader. Value based leadership has been found to be universally endorsed as contributing to effective leadership across cultures (House et al., 1998).
1.1. Value based leadership and motivation

An important component of Value Based Leadership Theory is McClelland’s (1985) work on the motivational bases of human behaviour. McClelland (1985) introduced a theory, the Leader Motive Profile (LMP), to explain leader effectiveness as a function of a specific combination of motives. McClelland (1985) argued that a certain combination of non-conscious motives were predictive of leader effectiveness. This combination is high power motivation, moderate achievement motivation, high responsibility disposition and power motivation greater than affiliative motivation. McClelland (1985) refers to this combination as the Imperialistic Motivational Pattern or the Leader Motive Profile (LMP).

House and Aditya (1997) have defined the power motive as a nonconscious concern for acquiring status and having an impact on others. Individuals with a high need for power enjoy influencing people and events, and are more likely to seek positions of authority. The achievement motive has been defined as a non-conscious concern for achieving excellence in accomplishments through one’s efforts (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark and Lowell, 1958). Theoretically, managers high in achievement motive would prefer to be personally responsible for their performance and would be reluctant to delegate responsibility and authority (Horowitz, 1961). Responsibility disposition is the restraint an individual feels about using power impulsively or using power to manipulate others (McClelland, 1985). Indicators of high responsibility disposition are expressions of concern about meeting moral standards and obligations to others.

McClelland (1985), reasons that the high need for power is an appropriate motive for leaders because it induces them to engage in social influence behaviour to accomplish goals. Further, the low need for affiliation allows a leader to remain socially distant from subordinates, resulting in more objectivity with respect to delegation and discipline of subordinates. Lastly, when a high power motivation is matched with a high responsibility disposition, leaders are predicted to exercise power in an effective and socially desirable manner. In their study of non-technical managers at AT&T over a sixteen year interval, McClelland and Boyatzis (1982) have demonstrated that the LMP was predictive of long-term managerial success. Leaders having the LMP are expected to have strongly internalised ideological values and thus, stress ideological value orientation, integrity and fairness. This complements Value Based Leadership Theory, which states that organisational members will be motivated based on shared internalised values and identification with the leader and the collective (House, 1999). In addition, a relationship based on value identification between leader and organisational members will result in increased member commitment and motivation, as well as increased organisational cohesion.

1.1.1. Australian leadership

Yukl (1998) notes that the amount of leadership research conducted in other cultures is very limited, with most of the research on leadership during the past half century being conducted in the United States, Canada and Western Europe. This has led Midgley (1995) to point out that although the global literature on the development of leadership skills was extensive, the majority of this literature was written from the perspective of American and Western European cultures and may not be applicable to the Australian context.

Research on Australian leadership has been sparse. According to Parry and Sarros (1996), there are significant differences between Australians and Americans in their perceptions of leadership. While charisma in America consists of idealised influence, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration was found to be a sub-factor of charisma in Australia. Hence, for Australian leaders to be charismatic, they should utilise skills relating more individually to their followers. The implicit issue of the ‘Australasian-ness’ of leadership was also mentioned by Parry (1998), indicating the unique nature of Australian leadership.

In their analysis of Australian culture and leadership, Ashkanasy and Falkus (1997) found that Australian culture and leadership was enigmatic, full of contradiction and change. Their study revealed four uniquely Australian dimensions of leadership: (1) mateship; (2) one of us; (3) underdog; and (4) tall poppy syndrome. The last dimension, the tall poppy syndrome, is the propensity to denigrate those viewed as tall poppies (Feather, 1994). The term tall poppy refers to a person who is conspicuously successful and whose distinction, rank or wealth attracts envious notice or hostility (Ramson, 1988). In
light of their findings, Ashkanasy and Falkus (1997) concluded that successful leadership in Australia was not easily achieved. Australian leaders are expected to inspire high levels of performance, but must do so without being too charismatic and standing out from the rest.

The Australian cultural characteristic, the tall poppy syndrome, is proposed here to moderate value based leadership processes. Tall poppy research in Australia has been pioneered primarily by social psychologist Norman Feather (1989, 1994). One of the theoretical ideas that guided the tall poppy research program was Value Theory (Feather, 1994). Feather (1994) views values as properties of persons that involve general beliefs about desirable or undesirable ways of behaving and about desirable or undesirable goals. Further, Feather also assumes that values transcend more specific attitudes toward objects and situations, while influencing the form attitudes take. This perspective links well with Value Based Leadership Theory, as a value based leader is a leader who endorses values that are congruent with the values of followers and that are generally congruent with the values stressed by cultural norms (House, Wright and Aditya, 1997).

1.2. Hypothesis development

The model for testing Value Based Leadership Theory in Australia is shown in Figure 1. Within the model, two sets of hypotheses are developed: (1) the effect of leader motives on subordinates’ commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction (CEMS); and (2) the effect of leader behaviour on CEMS. Research has shown that charismatic leader motives and behaviour are positively related to employee commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction (House, 1999; House, Spangler and Woycke, 1991). In addition to the development of hypotheses about Value Based Leadership Theory, effects of the tall poppy syndrome in Australia (Feather, 1989, 1994) are also hypothesised. It is claimed that Australians feel a certain amount of satisfaction when tall poppies are cut down to size and suffer a major reverse in status (Feather, 1994). Hence, it is proposed that subordinate tall poppy attitudes will have a moderating effect on value based leadership processes (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. The effects of tall poppy attitudes on Value Based Leadership Theory.](image)

As the main components of Value Based Leadership Theory are value based leader behaviour and leader motives (i.e., power motive, achievement motive, affiliation motive, moral responsibility disposition, leader motive profile), it is expected that these two main components will account for a statistically significant amount of variance in subordinate CEMS. Hence, it is hypothesised that:

**Hypothesis 1:** The combined effects of leader motives, the leader motive profile and value based leader behaviour will have a positive relationship with subordinate CEMS.

The main model can be decomposed into its two main components of leader motives and value based leader behaviour to assess their separate effects on subordinate CEMS. The first component of Value Based Leadership Theory is leader motives. It is expected that the leader motives component will predict a statistically significant amount of variance in CEMS. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:
Hypothesis 2: The individual and combined leader motives and the leader motive profile will have a positive relationship with subordinate CEMS.

Within Hypothesis 2, it is also expected that the individual leader motives will have relationships with subordinate CEMS. As Australia is low on the power distance dimension of culture (Hofstede, 1980) and Australians highly value their egalitarian nature (Ashkanasy and Falkus, 1997), it is expected that Australian leaders who exhibit a high power motivation will have subordinates with lower commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction. Hence,

Hypothesis 2a: There will be a negative relationship between leader power motivation and subordinate CEMS.

The Australian culture highly values achievement orientation (Ashkanasy and Falkus, 1997). Although achievement motivation has been shown to be inversely related to leader effectiveness (House, Spangler and Woycke, 1991), because of the Australian value on achievement, it is believed that Australian leaders who show a high achievement motivation will have subordinates who are more committed, effective, motivated and satisfied. Therefore,

Hypothesis 2b: There will be a positive relationship between leader achievement motivation and subordinate CEMS.

McClelland and Boyatzis (1982) argue that there is a negative relationship between leader performance and the affiliative motive. However, in the Australian culture where leaders are expected to be inspiring but must do so without being too charismatic and standing out from the rest, it is hypothesized that Australian leaders must use affiliation with subordinates to inspire them to higher levels of commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction. Hence,

Hypothesis 2c: There will be a positive relationship between leader affiliative motivation and subordinate CEMS.

Previous research shows that moral responsibility disposition is positively related with leader performance (House, Spangler and Woycke, 1991). Consistent with this finding is the finding that the humane orientation is highly valued in the Australian culture (Ashkanasy and Falkus, 1997). Therefore,

Hypothesis 2d: There will be a positive relationship between leader moral responsibility disposition and subordinate CEMS.

The second main component of Value Based Leadership Theory is value based leader behaviour. The GLOBE project has shown that value based leader behaviour is universally endorsed as contributing to leadership effectiveness (House et al., 1998). Hence,

Hypothesis 3: There will be a positive relationship between value based leader behaviour and subordinate CEMS.

It is also expected that Australian subordinate tall poppy attitudes will moderate Australian leader motives and value based leader behaviour. Hence,

Hypothesis 4: The combined effects of leader motives, the leader motive profile, value based leader behaviour and the interaction effects between selected motives and value based leader behaviour with tall poppy attitudes will have a positive relationship with subordinate CEMS.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

Australian CEOs were identified from the Queensland 400, a business publication listing the top 400 largest businesses in Queensland. To qualify for the study, an organisation had to have at least thirty employees. After calling the organisation to verify the name of the present CEO and a minimum of thirty staff, a database was generated with a total of 105 CEOs. Letters were then sent out requesting the participation of the CEO in this study. A week later, a phone call was made to remind the CEO
about the letter. Using this process, forty CEOs were interviewed, reflecting a response rate of 38%.
Semi-structured interviews consisting of eleven questions and lasting 30 to 45 minutes were used to elicit the CEOs’ dominant concerns, beliefs, values, opinions and their philosophy of management. The interviews were recorded on cassette tapes.

After the CEO interview was completed, the CEO was asked to nominate nine of his/her immediate subordinates to answer the questionnaires, six of whom were to be familiar with the CEO’s behaviour with the remainder being knowledgeable about the organisation’s practices. The six nominated subordinates who were familiar with the CEO’s behaviour were each given either questionnaire versions F or G (the measure of leader behaviour), while the three nominated subordinates who were knowledgeable about the organisation’s practices were each given questionnaire version H (the measure of organisation practices). After completion, participants sealed and returned the questionnaires using postage-paid envelopes.

One hundred and fifty seven of the subordinates returned the questionnaires, representing a response rate of 44%. Of these, eight questionnaires were unusable due to incomplete information. Hence, the sample consisted of 149 relationships between CEOs and their subordinates, reflecting an average number of 6.77 subordinates per CEO. Industries represented were building/construction (4), engineering (1), financial services/insurance (2), human resources/research (2), information technology (4), manufacturing (4), mining (1), transport (1), and wholesale/food (3). The majority of the 22 CEOs were in the 52–60 age group (43.6%). The next largest age group was the 41–50 age group, representing 34.9% of the CEOs. The 31–40 age group accounted for 14.8% of the CEOs, while 6.7% of the CEOs were in the 61–70 age group. Twenty CEOs were from Brisbane, while two were from Sydney. Only one CEO was female. The mean age of the subordinate respondents who returned useable questionnaires was 39.6 years, and the subordinate respondents were made up of 100 males (67.1%) and 49 (32.9%) females.

2.2. Measures

Three variables were assessed in this study: Value based leader behaviour, CEMS, and subordinate tall poppy attitudes. Measures of the variable were taken from the GLOBE project, a worldwide study of the leadership practices of CEOs and reactions to these different practices in different cultures (House et al., 1998). Questionnaire versions F, G and H from the GLOBE project were used.

The value based leader behaviour construct was measured with the use of GLOBE questionnaire versions F and G, which has eight value based leader behaviour sub-scales with a total of 43 items. All items were assessed with 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 = ‘strongly agree’. To control for extreme scores on the value based leader behaviour sub-scales, the items in each of the sub-scales were placed randomly in questionnaire versions F and G. For example, three items of the diplomatic behaviour scale were placed in questionnaire version F and three items were placed in questionnaire version G.

Subordinate Commitment, Effectiveness, Motivation and Satisfaction were measured with the use of eleven items (House et al., 1998). These eleven items appear in all the questionnaire versions under the heading ‘Your Reaction.’ The scale ranged from 1 = ‘Strongly Disagree’ to 7 = ‘Strongly Agree.’ One item was reverse scored. Subordinate CEMS scores were averaged to obtain a composite subordinate CEMS score for that particular CEO to control for extreme scores. The Cronbach alpha for subordinate CEMS was 0.80, indicating that this measure was reliable.

Subordinate tall poppy attitudes were measured using Feather’s (1989) Tall Poppy Scale. The Tall Poppy Scale consists of twenty six-point items, half of which express positive attitudes towards tall poppies and half of which express negative attitudes. The positive attitude items are reverse scored in calculations of composite scores. Thus, this scale measures generally negative attitudes towards the tall poppy, favouring the fall and not rewarding the tall poppy’s success.

Scale anchors are as follows: +1 = ‘I agree a little’; +2 = I agree on the whole’; +3 = ‘I agree very much’; −1 = ‘I disagree a little’; −2 = ‘I disagree on the whole’; −3 = ‘I disagree very much’. A constant of 4 is added to the item responses to produce a positive scale. The Tall Poppy Total Attitude score is computed by reverse coding the scores on the favour reward subscale. Feather (1989) reported a Cronbach alpha of 0.86 for the Tall Poppy Total Attitude scale.
3. Results

CEO interviews were transcribed and coded for motive imagery using Winter’s (1991) motive scoring system for the power, achievement and affiliation motives, and Winter’s (1992) responsibility coding system for the responsibility disposition. Two expert coders, who demonstrated a category agreement of 87%, scored the transcripts. Power imagery was scored for any indication that the CEO had impact, control or influence on another person. Achievement imagery was scored for any indication of a standard of excellence, and affiliation imagery was scored for any indication of establishing, maintaining or restoring friendly relations among persons.

There was also sufficient information in the interview transcripts to code three components of the moral responsibility measure (Winter, 1992): (1) moral standards, (2) obligation, and (3) concern for others. Scores on these sub-scales were used as manifest indicators of the moral responsibility disposition construct. The moral standards sub-scale is an abstract standard or principle involving legal, ethical or moral standards. Obligation is manifested when a behaviour is described as being simulated or regulated by a rule, regulation, moral or inner obligation. Concern for others is scored when help is given to someone else (whether solicited or not) or when sympathetic concern about another person is shown. The leader motive profile (LMP) construct was operationalised as a dichotomous dummy variable where CEOs with the following leader motive profile received a score of 1 and any other profile received a score of 0.

(a) Power motive score greater than Median of all Power motive scores,
(b) Power motive score greater than Affiliative motive score, and
(c) Responsibility score greater than Median of all Responsibility scores.

The intercoder correlation coefficients for leader power, achievement and affiliation motives were 0.80, 0.82 and 0.86 respectively. Intercoder correlation coefficients for the three sub-scales of the responsibility disposition moral standards, obligation and concern for others, were 0.78, 0.84 and 0.75 respectively. This result demonstrated intercoder reliability.

3.1. Hypotheses

To avoid committing a Type II error with the small sample size used in this study (N = 22), the results of the following regression equations were evaluated at the significance level of 0.10, as suggested by Cohen (1988) for small-to medium effect sizes.

The hypothesis that the combined effects of leader motives, the leader motive profile and value based leader behaviour will have a positive relationship with subordinate CEMS was significant ($F(6, 15) = 3.94, p < 0.05$), with the independent variables accounting for 62.1% of the variance in the independent variable. At the 0.10 significance level, leader affiliative motive, leader moral responsibility disposition and value based leader behaviour were significant predictors of subordinate CEMS. Thus, hypothesis one was supported.

The second hypothesis which stated that the combined effects of the leader motives together with the leader motive profile will have a positive relationship with subordinate CEMS was also significant ($F(5, 16) = 3.16, p < 0.05$), accounting for 50% of the variance in CEMS. Hence, hypothesis two was supported. The hypothesis that there will be a negative relationship between leader power motivation and subordinate CEMS was not supported ($t(16) = 1.20, n.s.$). Contrary to expectations, the results showed that leader achievement motive had a significant negative relationship with subordinate CEMS ($t(16) = -2.70, p < 0.05$). On the other hand, the hypothesis that there will be a positive relationship between leader affiliative motivation and subordinate CEMS was supported ($t(16) = 1.92, p < 0.10$).

Support was found for the hypothesis that there will be a positive relationship between leader moral responsibility disposition and subordinate CEMS ($t(16) = 2.72, p < 0.05$). As predicted, there is a positive relationship between value based leader behaviour (VBL) and subordinate CEMS ($F(1, 20) = 13.88, p < 0.01, B = 0.64, R^2 = 0.41$).
The fourth hypothesis stated that the combined effects of leader motives, the leader motive profile, value based leader behaviour and the interaction effects between selected motives and value based leader behaviour with tall poppy attitudes will have a positive relationship with subordinate CEMS. The hypothesis that Australian subordinate tall poppy attitudes would moderate Value Based Leadership Theory was supported ($F(9, 12) = 3.097, p < 0.05$). The model explained $69.9\%$ of variance in the dependent variables, which was an $8.7\%$ improvement over the model that did not consider the interaction effects of subordinate tall poppy attitudes on leader power motivation, leader achievement motivation and value based leader behaviour.

Because only leader affiliative motivation and leader moral responsibility disposition were significant predictors of subordinate CEMS at the $0.10$ significance level, hypothesis four was only partially supported. Indirect support for hypothesis four was provided, however, by the significant negative relationship between subordinate tall poppy attitudes and value based leader behaviour ($F(1, 20) = 3.18, p < 0.10, B = -0.37, R^2 = 0.14$) and subordinate CEMS ($F(1, 20) = 4.26, p < 0.10, B = -0.42, R^2 = 0.18$).

Figure 2. The effects of tall poppy attitudes on Value Based Leadership Theory – amended model.

4. Discussion

A survey study of twenty-two Australian Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and their subordinates examined relationships between Australian leader motives, Australian value based leader behaviour, subordinate tall poppy attitudes and subordinate commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction (CEMS). On the whole, the results showed general support for value based leadership processes. Subsequent regression analyses of the second main component of Value Based Leadership Theory, value based leader behaviour, revealed that the collectivistic, inspirational, integrity and visionary behaviour sub-scales of the construct had positive relationships with subordinate CEMS. Although the hypothesis that subordinate tall poppy attitudes would moderate value based leadership processes was not clearly supported, subsequent regression analyses found that subordinate tall poppy attitudes had negative relationships with their perceptions of value based leader behaviour and their CEMS. These findings suggest complex relationships between the three constructs. The results suggest that the original model presented requires some amendments within the Australian context (see Figure 2).

The main limitations that need to be acknowledged in this research relate to causality, the cross-sectional nature of the research, the small sample size, measurement limitations, the poor reliability of some of the value based leader behaviour sub-scales, and the micro-level and leader-centric approaches adopted.

This research has practical implications for the effective practice and development of leadership in organisations outside the North American context. First, research taking into account culture-specific attitudes can be used to show leaders which leader behaviours in a given cultural context are more likely to result in more committed, effective, motivated and satisfied subordinates. With the knowledge of such behaviours, they should be able to establish and maintain effective working relationships with their subordinates, which, in turn, should enable them to work more effectively towards the organisation’s goals. For example, Australian management development would need to emphasise
using interpersonal skills instead of status position to accomplish objectives. Second, the findings demonstrate the need for leadership studies that consider the role of cultural values and attitudes in leadership outcomes.

References


