Resistance to Authority

Resistance to deficient organizational authority: The impact of culture and connectedness in the workplace

Wilhelmina Wosinska, Arizona State University West

Robert B. Cialdini, Arizona State University

Petia Petrova, Dartmouth College

Vladas Griskevicius, Arizona State University

Daniel W. Barrett, University of Pennsylvania

Malgorzata Gornik-Durose, University of Silesia, Poland

Jonathan Butner, University of Utah
Abstract

We investigated resistance to a request made by a manager who lacked a key leadership attribute - expertise or relationality - in countries that differed in traditional individualistic versus collectivistic orientation (the U.S. and Poland). An experiment examined how resistance to a deficient authority is affected by degree of employee connectedness at the workplace. Results were consistent with cultural differences in the key preferred attribute of leaders in the two nations. That is, participants in each country were more resistant to a manager who lacked the attribute that is more valued in that particular culture: Americans were more noncompliant with managers lacking in expertise, whereas Poles were more noncompliant with managers lacking in relational skills. However, this culturally-valued-leadership-deficiency effect occurred only under conditions of well-established workplace relationships, suggesting that connectedness to the group creates a tendency to behave in line with predominant cultural norms. Practical implications of the effect and its preconditions are discussed.
There is a long and rich history of theory and research regarding effective social influence approaches within organizations (Emans, Munduate, Klaver, & van de Vliert, 2003; Hirokawa & Wagner, 2004; Koslowsky, Schwartzwald, & Ashuri, 2001; Kramer & Neale, 1998; Lord, 1977; Rahim & Buntzman, 1988; Raven, 1965, 1992, 1993; Raven, Schwartzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998; Schwartzwald, Koslowsky, & Agassi, 2001; Yukl, 1994; Yukl, & Falbe, 1991). However, even though rapid globalization and the accompanying growth of international business have helped fuel an interest in cross-cultural organizational research, almost all of these studies have investigated effective organizational influence as it occurred in a single nation.

In an attempt to help redress this imbalance, we sought to investigate one fundamental source of organizational influence - managerial authority - in a pair of cultures (Poland and the U.S.) whose members were likely to value different types of authority (Fakouri & Mehryar, 1972; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Wojciszke, 1997). Moreover, we sought not to examine compliance with properly exercised managerial authority but to study noncompliance with deficiently exercised authority. More specifically, we set out to build on the emerging research on resistance to authority (Sachau, Houlihan, & Gilbertson, 1999; Sagarin, Cialdini, Rice, & Serna, 2002) by looking at how a deficiency in a supervisor’s managerial approach could lead to employee resistance to that manager’s request.

*Expert and relational authorities in a cross-cultural perspective.*

Before describing our investigation in detail, it is necessary to explicate two crucial distinctions pertaining to authority and culture. The first refers to types of authority and specifically to the difference between expert versus relational leaders. The second
considers cultural differences with regard to an individualistic versus collectivistic value orientation.

The distinction between expert and relational leaders dates back to Bales’ (1958) classic research looking at the influence of task-oriented (that is, using expertise to achieve success) versus socio-emotional (that is, requiring relational skills for success) managers. This important dichotomy appears in numerous conceptualizations under various labels for authority, such as facilitative versus supportive (Bowers & Seashore, 1966), production-centered versus employee-centered (Likert, 1967), administratively-skilled versus relations-skilled (Mann, 1965), or goal-achievement versus group-maintenance oriented leaders (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). More recently, Tyler (1997) has proposed a similar taxonomy of types of organizational authorities, including instrumental (stemming from the skillful management of resources) and relational (resulting from efficient interactions with others).

This expert versus relational distinction has also been examined cross-culturally in nations and individuals that differ in their individualistic and collectivistic value systems (Adler, Campbell, & Laurent, 1989; De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000; Fakouri & Mehryar, 1972; Schwartz, 1999; Wojciszke, 1997). This research has shown that both individuals and cultures that tend to prefer either an individualistic or a collectivistic value system can also be expected to show preferences for expert versus relational leaders, respectively. For example, persons with individualistic value orientations tend to search primarily for competence information when forming impressions of others (De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000), whereas people with collectivistic value orientations tend to focus primarily on information concerning relationality and morality (Schwartz, 1999; Wojciszke, 1997). Since people in individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in the extent to which they
value different attributes in an authority, we might expect that in both cultures employees would be more resistant to an authority deficient in the culturally valued characteristic. However, we believe there may be an additional, complicating factor: employee connectedness within their workgroups.

Employee connectedness in the workgroup and compliance.

Considerable research demonstrates that when people receive requests from a legitimately constituted authority, they often comply, even in a direction they would not prefer (Blass, 1999; Hofling, Brotzman, Dalrymple, Graves, & Pierce, 1966; Krackow & Blass, 1995; Milgram, 1974). One factor that has been shown to affect organizational leaders’ effectiveness is the quality of the relationships between employees and the manager (see Gerstner & Day, 1997, for a review). However, none of these studies nor any other that we are aware of examined how employees’ relationships with co-workers impact their resistance to an organizational authority. To the extent that one feels connected to a group, influences from within the group may be powerful enough to counteract tendencies toward deference to authority (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; van Knippenberg, 2000).

According to Social Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987; Terry, Hogg, & White, 2000), the effect of group membership is to render behavior more congruent with the likely norms and prototypical behavioral characteristics of the group. Support for this contention comes from evidence that group membership leads members to respond as a prototypical group member would (Levine & Moreland, 1998; Kashima & Lewis, 2000; van Knippenberg, 2000). Thus, if group membership activates conformity with the likely group norms and ideals, culturally prototypical responding in the workplace should occur principally when workgroup connectedness is high.
Research Overview

In order to examine resistance to managerial authority, we constructed an experiment in which university students in Poland and in the U.S. indicated the extent to which they would comply with a supervisor’s request to support an initiative that they felt would be wrongheaded. It might be argued that the aggressive entrance of a market economy and Western customs into Poland would blunt effects attributable to national differences in individualistic versus collectivistic value orientation. However, Reykowski and his colleagues (Reykowski, 1994; Reykowski & Smolenska, 1993) have argued that these influences have produced only superficial changes that have not much affected deep-seated traditional collectivistic values. Consequently, Poland still scores in the low to average range on measures of individualism (Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998).

We varied whether the supervisor was deficient in expert or relational qualities. Moreover, we manipulated whether participants had a high or low degree of connectedness with their workplace colleagues. That is, participants were either told to suppose that they had many or few personal relationships and contacts with their workmates. We considered two possible outcomes.

Possible Outcome #1: Resistance would be greater in Poland to a manager who is deficient in relational (versus expert) qualities of leadership; but, resistance would be greater in the U.S. to a manager who is deficient in expert (versus relational) qualities of leadership.

Such a potential outcome would support the assumption that traditional differences in individualistic versus collectivistic orientations of the two countries (Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998) would incline Polish participants to be more resistant to managers who violated the cultural value for relationality and would incline U.S. participants to be more
resistant to managers who failed to meet the cultural value for expertise. Hence, the outcome would manifest itself as a 2-way interaction between nation and type of managerial deficiency. According to this set of assumptions, degree of connectedness with one’s workgroup should not affect the expected pattern.

Possible Outcome #2: Poles should show greater resistance to a relationally-deficient manager, whereas Americans should show greater resistance to an expertise-deficient manager; but, this pattern should occur principally among employees who have a high degree of workgroup connectedness.

If this pattern of results occurred, it would support the assumption that high workgroup connectedness should stimulate tendencies to conform to the most likely group norms and ideals relevant to the culture. In a traditionally collectivistic country such as Poland, these norms and ideals would favor relationality, generating greater resistance to a leader who was deficient in this regard. In a largely individualistic nation such as the U.S., however, these norms and ideals would favor expertise, generating greater resistance to a leader who was deficient in this respect. This outcome would manifest itself as a 3-way interaction of nation, type of managerial deficiency, and degree of workgroup connectedness.

Method

Participants and procedure.

Our participants consisted of undergraduate psychology majors from two countries: 160 from Poland (42 males and 118 females) and 162 from the US (46 males and 117 females). The Polish translation of the American version of the material was re-translated back to English by a bilingual speaker and matched for adequacy, which did not require any substantial adjustments.
To test the amount of reported resistance in response to a manager’s request, we used a typical arrangement employed in previous research on compliance in organizations (e.g., Koslowsky, Schwartzwald, & Ashuri, 2001; Raven, Schwartzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998). Participants were first presented with a specific organizational situation that concludes with a manager making a request which conflicts with the employee’s personal opinion. Participants were then asked to indicate their likelihood of compliance with the manager’s request.

To test our hypotheses we employed a 2 x 2 x 2 design with nation (US and Poland), type of managerial deficiency (expertise-deficient vs. relationally-deficient), and degree of workgroup connectedness (high vs. low) as between-subjects factors. Our key dependent variable was the reported willingness to comply with the manager’s request.

To manipulate these factors, we used the following scenario, where brackets and italics denote phrasing in two different conditions:

Imagine that 2-3 months ago you started working for a firm in a lower management position. [Low Degree of Connectedness: Because you are new, you haven’t yet established] [High Degree of Connectedness: Even though you are new, you have already established] very many personal relationships and contacts in the workplace with other employees.

Your firm is considering a new program of managerial training for many current managers, including you. As is traditional for your firm, whenever a change of this sort is proposed, those managers who will be directly affected are asked to give their opinions about the proposed program. This program will be quite time consuming and, in your opinion, it would not be worth the effort it will require. You will be asked to give your vote on this matter anonymously so that no one can know how you voted. Your immediate
boss, Mr. Keller, has made it clear in a departmental memo that he would like this new training program to go forward. Thus, he has asked you and your fellow managers to support it in your votes.

[Expertise-Deficient Manager: *When making this decision, take into account that your boss is concerned with his employees’ well-being and with maintaining harmonious relationships with them; however, he has limited expertise in his field and is not that good at achieving organizational goals.*][Relationally-Deficient Manager: *When making this decision, take into account that your boss has high expertise in his field and is good at achieving organizational goals; however, he is not that concerned with his employees’ well-being or with maintaining harmonious relationships with them.*]

All participants were asked to indicate their willingness to comply by responding to the following scale:

The likelihood that you will follow your boss’s wish and vote in favor of this new program is:

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<td>very low</td>
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**Results**

Our preliminary analyses indicated a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 306) = 9.180$, $p = .003$, with males showing a higher likelihood of complying. Because gender did not interact with any other variables, we included gender as a covariate in the analyses. Additionally, we observed a marginal main effect of nation, $F(1, 306) = 3.625$, $p = .058$, showing that Polish participants indicated a somewhat higher level of overall compliance.
Support for Possible Outcome #1. The first possible outcome was that resistance in each country would be greater to the type of manager who lacked the more culturally-valued leadership attribute of that nation. Statistical support for this outcome would occur as a 2-way interaction between nation and type of managerial deficiency across the two workgroup connectedness conditions. However, our results showed that this interaction was not significant, $F(1, 306) = .810, p = .369$.

Support for Possible Outcome #2. The second possible outcome was that the phenomenon of greater resistance to the manager who lacked the culturally-valued leadership attribute would appear principally when the employees had a high degree of workgroup connectedness. Statistical support for this outcome would be indicated by the joint presence of a 3-way interaction among nation, type of managerial deficiency, and workgroup connectedness, and a 2-way interaction between nation and type of managerial deficiency in the established workgroup connectedness condition. Both of these interactions proved significant, $F(2, 306) = 4.982, p = .007$, and $F(1, 151) = 7.348, p = .007$, respectively (see Figure 1).

As would be expected, analyses of simple effects in the high workgroup connectedness condition indicated that the U.S. participants showed more resistance to an expertise-deficient authority than to a relationally-deficient manager, $F(1, 75) = 3.998$, $p = .049$, whereas in Poland, participants indicated marginally more resistance to a relationally-deficient authority than to an expertise-deficient manager, $F(1, 76) = 3.368$, $p = .070$. In the low connectedness condition, on the other hand, there was a marginally significant 2-way interaction between nation and type of managerial deficiency displaying a pattern opposite to the one in the high connectedness condition, $F(1,555) = 2.855, p = .093$. The
simple effects of the type of managerial deficiency in this condition, however, were not significant for either the U.S., $F(1,79) = 1.440, p = .234$, or Poland, $F(1,76) = 1.419, p = .237$.

Discussion

This study examined employee resistance to expertise- and relationally-deficient authorities in the predominantly individualistic U.S. culture and the more collectivistic culture of Poland. After reviewing the relevant literature, we had reason to believe that two different outcomes were viable. First, because collectivists tend to value relationality while for individualists expertise and competence take priority, one possibility was that these cultural preferences would stimulate different patterns of resistance to deficient authorities in the U.S. and Poland. Second, it was also plausible that this relative difference in noncompliance would be qualified by the degree of employees’ connectedness within their workgroup, such that high group connectedness would increase the salience and impact of dominant cultural norms.

Our results indicated that Poles and Americans did indeed differ in their levels of projected noncompliance with authorities deficient in expertise or relationality. As could be predicted from cultural preferences related to prevailing value orientations, Poles felt more resistance to a manager who was deficient in relationality, whereas Americans felt more resistant to a manager who lacked expertise. In other words, people in each country felt less willing to comply with a request from an authority who lacked the attributes that are considered more important for leaders in that culture. However, this cultural difference was only found in the context of well-established connections with other workgroup members. That is, employees were more resistant to an authority who lacked the culturally-valued trait only when they perceived many established connections to other workgroup
members. Without a context of well-established connections to other workgroup members, participants showed no differences in their relative resistance to either type of authority in either country.

**Theoretical implications.** Despite the rapid shifts toward a market economy in Eastern European countries, including Poland, numerous researchers have indicated that such changes are so far having a relatively limited impact on traditional collectivistic values (Nasierowski & Mikula, 1998; Reykowski, 1994, 1998; Schwartz & Bardi, 1997; Szabo, Jarmuz, Maczynski, & Reber, 1997; Skipietrow, 1992). For instance, many Poles still consider personal success to be a “sin” (Skarzynska, 1999; Wojciszke, 1999) and in difficult situations they tend to seek support within family instead of managing on their own (Reykowski, 1994; Reykowski, & Smolenska, 1993).

Our results support the notion that Poland still retains some core aspects of its collectivistic identity, but our study also points out that these traditional values may not manifest themselves under all circumstances. That is, while we did find the predicted difference between the U.S. and Poland in terms of resisting deficient authorities, this difference only appeared when group and cultural norms were made salient by the high level of workplace connectedness. When these group bonds and salient norms were relatively absent, Poles and Americans did not show any significant differences. These findings fit well with evidence that group and cultural norms have little direct impact on behavior unless they are salient in consciousness (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1999; Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000).

It is also noteworthy to mention that while the two-way interaction in the low connectedness condition was not conventionally significant (p = .093), the observed pattern of results in this condition is exactly the opposite of the results in the high
connectedness condition (see Figure 1). This reverse pattern may suggest that when employees feel separated from the group, they may be more likely to act in the opposite direction of the prototypical norms of the group. However, this speculation needs to be examined in future studies.

Our data also highlight two important theoretical points regarding factors that can lead to resistant behavior in organizations. First, it may be mistaken to think that cultural differences in leadership preferences would not affect resistance to deficient authorities. Much research has already found that leader prototypes for different cultures are related to cultural values (e.g., House & Hanges, 1999; Brodbeck et al., 2000; Aycan, Kanungo, Mendonca, Yu, Deller, Stahl & Kurshid, 2000; Smith, Wang, & Leung, 1997). Our research expands on this idea by pointing out that these preferences are also important when considering resistance to deficient authorities. In fact, we specifically found that when a manager lacked an attribute that is preferably valued in that particular culture, our participants became more resistant to the manager. We labeled this tendency the culturally-valued-leadership-deficiency effect, and it is likely that this phenomenon is also relevant beyond the organizational arena. For example, this effect would likely manifest itself in any universal situation where an authority who is lacking in expertise or relationality may be trying to influence a target, such as when a teacher attempts to gain the compliance of a student. The applicability and magnitude of the culturally-valued-leadership-deficiency effect across different types of social situations would be an interesting topic to examine in further studies.

Second, it may be equally mistaken to think that group members’ level of connectedness will not affect how people will resist a deficient authority. Our results highlight that a connected workplace environment—one where people feel that they have
many established relationships with their co-workers—is likely to make people more inclined to act in accord with cultural norms. As before, this effect probably extends into other social arenas beyond the organizational realm.

The current project also adds insight to the sparse literature on resistance to authority. While some research on resistance in organizations has thus far examined person-related characteristics, such as employees’ sex, age, and tenure (Sachau, Holihan, & Gilbertson, 1999; Hong, 1999), our study points out that situational factors also play an important role in resisting authority. More specifically, we found that the degree of employee connectedness at the workplace may be a key factor in how employees react to managerial requests. Undoubtedly, further research will need to examine how this condition, intertwined with other situational factors, affects resistance to organizational authorities.

**Practical implications.** Other researchers have noted that rapid globalization creates a strong need for managers working in multi-national and international organizations to be familiar with and to match their style to local cultural values (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993, 1996; Hanges, Lord, & Dickson, 2000). Our research supports these recommendations by showing that cultural values do affect resistance to managerial directions and initiatives. Furthermore, in order to overcome resistance from their employees, managers need to do more than take into account the specific values of the culture; they also need to be aware of the relationships among their subordinates. For instance, when dealing with a new employee, even a deficient manager may experience little resistance and be lulled into a false sense of security and efficiency. However, this lack of resistance might not be indicative of the manager’s supervisory skills or actions. Indeed, noncompliance may
increase as the employee establishes relationships at the workplace even if the manager’s behavior has not changed, leaving the supervisor bewildered as to the cause.

Moreover, the increase in resistance due to employee connectedness will be different across cultures. More specifically, resistance in a given culture will be sensitive to the manager’s leadership style. In the United States, a manager who does not demonstrate expertise may find increasing resistance from employees who become more connected to other workers. In contrast, in more collectivistic cultures, such as Poland, employees may become more resistant to a manager who does not have strong relational qualities. Finally, these findings suggest that leaders who wish to obtain high levels of compliance from their subordinates regarding initiatives and directives should consider different influence strategies depending on the local culture. In more individualistic cultures, people should be less likely to resist when the request or task is presented as one that would serve effectiveness goals. In collectivistic cultures, subordinates should be less likely to resist when a task is presented as one that would serve relational goals. It is important to note that this culturally-valued-leadership-deficiency effect and the strategies to overcome it should not be limited to business settings. As suggested previously, the same principles should apply in any organization with a semblance of a leadership hierarchy, such as political and health care organizations, non-profit agencies, and educational settings.

Moreover, although our specific findings relate only to Poland, we believe that similar effects are also likely to be exhibited in other Eastern European nations and other cultures with a stronger collectivistic orientation (Bond & Hewstone, 1988; Kagitcibasi, 1997).

Study limitations. A limitation of this study is one that is true of many cross-cultural investigations. The effects we attributed to variations in the individualistic versus collectivistic value orientations of our American and Polish participants could have been
due to other differences between the two countries. Nonetheless, we can think of no other previously recorded difference between Poland and the U. S. that could explain the pattern of results we found. Perhaps the best candidate in this regard would be that of power distance, which has been found to differ between the two nations, with Poles showing higher levels of the construct (Hofstede, 2001; Nasierowski, & Mikula, 1998). However, based on variations in power distance, one would only expect differences in the amount of resistance to authority, not the more complex differences in resistance to specifically deficient authorities that would be expected from variations in individualism/collectivism.

A second limitation of this research is that the results are based on a scenario design. However, this methodology has been shown to be effective in similar research (Koslowsky, Schwartzwald, & Ashuri, 2001; Raven, Schwartzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998). Another limitation is related to using students as subjects. We believe, though, that this study provides a pioneering step toward better understanding resistance to deficient authorities in a cross-cultural setting. Nonetheless, future research should examine these phenomena in field settings and in other cross-cultural contexts.
References


Figure Caption

*Figure 1:* US and Polish participants' level of resistance as a function of type of managerial deficiency and degree of workplace connectedness. (Responses were on a scale ranging from 0 to 8, with lower numbers indicating greater resistance.)
Figure 1.

**DEGREE OF CONNECTEDNESS**

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**TYPE OF MANAGERIAL DEFICIENCY**

- **Expertise-Deficient**
- **Relationally-Deficient**