

**STRATEGIES OF UPWARD INFLUENCE:  
A STUDY OF SIX CULTURES FROM EUROPE, ASIA, AND AMERICA**

**David A. Ralston**

University of Oklahoma  
USA

**Guenther Vollmer**

Fachhochschule Ludwigsburg  
Germany

**Narasimhan Srinivasan**

University of Connecticut  
USA

**Joel D. Nicholson**

San Francisco State University  
USA

**Moureen Tang and Paulina Wan**

Lingnan College  
Hong Kong (S.A.R.)

**Abstract**

We examine six cultures from the three economic centers of the world: Europe (Germany and the Netherlands), Asia (Hong Kong and India), and the Americas (Mexico and the U.S.). The findings from this exploratory study begin to identify patterns of influence strategies across cultures that are in part consistent with the existing cross-cultural values literature, while concurrently indicating the need for a more encompassing explanation of the cultural similarities, as well as differences, that were found in this study.

Global business is growing faster today than at any point in time in the past. Thus, the ability to understand and to work effectively with others from different cultures is also becoming increasingly important (Ralston, Holt, Terpstra & Yu, 1997; Tung & Miller, 1990). Specifically, one aspect of an international company's effectiveness is the quality of the work relationships between superiors and subordinates who come from different cultures. An important part of a superior's effectiveness is his/her ability to influence others within the organization (Schreisheim & Hinkin, 1990). Often managers may need or wish to influence people who are higher—not lower—in the organizational hierarchy (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988). Therefore, they need to develop and use upward influence strategies that may be crucial not only to their personal success, but also may contribute to the effectiveness of the company, since the ability of superiors and subordinates to function together effectively clearly affects organizational performance (Egri, Ralston, Murray & Nicholson, 2000).

In this study, we examine cultures from the economic triad: Europe, Asia and the Americas. We selected these regions because, while business is growing and expanding around the world, the major players in business today come from this economic triad. Specifically, we focus on the tactics that managers from these cultures emphasize as their means to influence their superiors. Our cross-cultural investigation of upward influence strategies includes as the European representatives, Germany and the Netherlands; as the Asian representatives, Hong Kong (S.A.R.) and India; and as the American representatives, Mexico and the U.S. Using the Ronen and Shenkar (1985) country clusters as a guide, we see that Germany is in the Germanic cluster, the U.S. is in the Anglo cluster, Mexico is in the Latin American cluster, Hong Kong is in the Far East cluster, and India is an Independent, with the Netherlands not being included in the Ronen and Shenkar country clustering. While these countries do not represent all cultures from the regions, we believe that these cultures do represent a good starting point for this investigation because of the diverse nature of our cultural representatives both across and within the respective regions. Thus, the primary goal of this study is to identify culturally inherent differences in subordinates' choices of influence tactics, which in turn may contribute to our understanding of the relationships between superiors and subordinates from different cultures (Schermerhorn & Bond 1991). Since there are few previous cross-cultural studies that used the SUI (Egri et al.; Ralston, Terpstra, Cunniff & Gustafson, 1995) and while there is a body of values literature that covers the countries of this study (e.g., Ronen & Shenkar, 1985; Hofstede & Bond, 1988), there may not be sufficient or sufficiently relevant literature to develop a sound theoretical foundation for directional hypotheses. Therefore, we will simply hypothesize differences across

these cultures and discuss the results in the context of this previous research. These results should help us to begin to identify the degree of compatibility in influence style across the cultures studied.

## **METHOD**

### **Subjects**

The 611 subjects in this study were managers/professionals from Germany (n=101), Hong Kong (n=117), India (n=66), Mexico (n=115), the Netherlands (n=101), and the United States (n=111). The mean ages of the subjects from these six cultures ranged from 37.5 to 41.0 years of age, and the years worked ranged from 12.0 to 16.1 years. While there was not great variance in these or the other demographics, marital status, position level, and organizational size, all five were entered into the analysis as covariates to determine if any have a significant impact on the model.

### **Instrument**

To test our hypothesis of differences, we used the 38-item Strategies of Upward Influence [SUI] measure (see Ralston, Giacalone & Terpstra, 1994). The SUI is a cross-culturally developed measure of attitudes towards upward influence tactics. The instrument development procedure for the SUI employed a nominal group technique (NGT) process that asked practicing managers in the U.S., Hong Kong, Germany and France to identify upward influence situations that they had observed. These responses were categorized and refined to create the 38 scenario items. Subsequently, these items were combined to create the six Job Tactics dimensions identified here. *Good Soldier* consists of five items including, “work overtime, if necessary, to get the job done.” *Rational Persuasion* consisted of four items including, “use their technical expertise to make the superior dependent upon them.” *Image Management* consisted of eight items including, “support the views of important people in the organization, even when they do not agree with these views.” *Personal Networking* consists of five items including, “seek to build a relationship with a senior person who could serve as a mentor.” *Information Control* consists of six items including, “withhold information to make someone else look bad.” And, *Strong-Arm Coercion* consists of eight items including, “use detrimental information to blackmail a person who is in a position to help them get ahead in the organization.” The higher the score, the greater is the perceived acceptability of that type of behavior. The instructions asked the subjects to indicate how acceptable it would be to engage in the behavior described in the 38 items. The instructions also told subjects that there were no right or wrong answers, that it was their perceptions that were important.

## **Design and Procedures**

The design addressed three issues relevant to cross-cultural research: [1] questionnaire translation, [2] standardization of response patterns, and [3] construct reliability across cultures. One, the SUI was translated and back-translated from English into each of the native languages of the cultures represented in this study, with the exception of India. For India, it was decided that since English is the language of business within India, it made most sense to use it as the language for these subjects. Two, to minimize the potential of culturally different response patterns, we converted subjects' scores for each dimension to culturally standardized scores. Three, to determine the consistency of the SUI dimensions across the six cultures, we used the well-accepted Cronbach alpha statistic to determine whether each dimension was sufficiently consistent (reliable) within each culture to be included in the analysis. The decision rule was to use  $\alpha = .60$  as the cut-point. There is no definitive rule for an alpha cut-point in cross-cultural studies. However, this alpha value seems to be generally accepted as reasonable. If a dimension was found not to meet this cut-point for a specific culture, the dimension was removed from the study.

## **Analysis**

The first step of the analysis was to perform a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The six cultures were our predictor variable. The relevant Job Tactics dimensions, as determined by the reliability estimates (alpha scores), were the dependent variables. The five demographic variables were entered as covariates. Next, if the MANCOVA was significant, univariate analyses for the dependent measure dimensions were conducted. The univariate analyses were ANCOVAs, using as covariates only the demographics identified in the MANCOVA as making a significant contribution to the model. If no covariate was significant, the analyses were run as ANOVAs. Finally, for the univariate analyses found to be significant, Duncan multiple comparison tests were conducted to identify group differences among the managers from the various cultures.

## **RESULTS**

### **Dimension Reliability Analysis**

Thirty-six Cronbach alpha estimates for the six SUI dimensions in each of the six cultures were calculated. All alphas exceeded the cut-point with the exceptions of Rational Persuasion (India:  $\alpha = .48$ ) and Personal Networking (Netherlands:  $\alpha = .51$ ). Thus, Rational Persuasion and Personal Networking were removed, and further analyses would include only the

four relevant dimensions that do meet the reliability criteria (Good Soldier, Image Management, Information Control and Strong-Arm Coercion).

### **Hypothesis Testing Analysis**

The MANCOVA (Wilks' lambda) for the four relevant dimensions was significant ( $\lambda=.185$ ,  $df=5,3,606$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and explained approximately 80% of the variance. None of the covariates made a significant contribution to the model. Therefore, ANOVAs were calculated for each of the four SUI dimensions. The ANOVA results showed that all univariate analyses were significant. Thus, Duncan multiple comparison tests were run for each of the four SUI dimensions. The ANOVA and Duncan Multiple Comparison Test findings are reported in Table 1 and discussed as cultural profiles in the subsequent section.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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## **DISCUSSION**

As the mean scores on Table 1 show, these cross-cultural comparisons of upward influence strategy preferences indicate each group's degree of emphasis. In almost all cases there is agreement across the cultures on whether a tactic is viewed as a positive or negative type of behavior. Thus, while we find significant differences among the managers of the various cultures, this does not necessarily mean that one group embraces a strategy while another totally rejects it. Nonetheless, the significance of the degree to which we do see differences suggests that there clearly is divergence in the degree to which the various tactics are preferred across the cultures in this study.

Therefore, to lay a foundation to build cultural profiles that compare and contrast the six cultures in this study, we begin by proposing that the upward influence tactics might be viewed in terms of high, medium and low levels of acceptance, and that the Job Tactics can be grouped into "soft" strategies and "hard" strategies. The soft strategies (Good Soldier and Image Management) are those where there is no intent to hurt others, while trying to promote oneself and one's personal wants. Conversely, the hard strategies (Information Control and Strong-Arm Coercion) are those that either allow someone else to be hurt or intentionally try to hurt another. In this discussion, we will cluster the cultures that share a similar profile.

**The United States and the Netherlands.** The American and Dutch managers viewed the use of the soft strategies (Good Soldier and Image Management) as a positive way to exert influence and consistently had the highest scores on

these dimensions. Conversely, they viewed the hard strategies (Information Control and Strong-Arm Coercion) negatively and consistently scored the lowest on using these as a means to gain influence. Thus, we find a consistent support for soft strategies and a consistent rejection of hard strategies in both of these cultures.

**Germany and India.** Consistent with the American and Dutch managers, the German and Indian managers viewed both soft strategies as a positive way to exert influence. However, the German and Indian managers considered these tactics significantly less important strategies than did the Americans and the Dutch. Again consistent with the American and Dutch Managers, the German and Indian managers perceived the hard strategies to be negative types of influence, but also found them to be significantly more acceptable than did the American and Dutch managers. Thus, the German and Indian managers were more balanced in their moderate use of all tactics than were any of the other four cultures.

**Hong Kong and Mexico.** The Hong Kong and Mexican managers, like all the other groups, view the Good Soldier tactic as a positive way to exert influence. However, the Hong Kong managers were the only group to hold a negative view, albeit slight, of Image Management. Also, like all other groups, the Hong Kong and Mexican managers held a negative view of the Information Control and Strong-Arm Coercion strategies. Nonetheless, in terms of the other groups in this study, the Hong Kong and Mexican managers are the antithesis of the American and Dutch managers in terms of their *degree* of support for the various tactics. Relatively speaking, these managers found the hard strategies to be reasonably acceptable and the soft strategies to be much less viable options. In essence, the Hong Kong and Mexican managers are more open to using the negatively perceived hard strategies and do not perceive using the soft strategies as being as productive as do the other four groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicated some definitive, contrasting patterns across the six cultures in our study. The cultures that were high on the soft tactics, the U.S. and the Netherlands, were low on the hard tactics, and vice versa for Hong Kong and Mexico. Additionally, those that were moderate on the soft tactics, Germany and India, were also moderate on the hard tactics. Given the Likert-style nature of the instrument, a culture could theoretically have responded high (or low) on all items and tactics. The design of the instrument does not dictate that an order or hierarchy be selected, nor does it require the cultural consistency that was found for tactic acceptance levels within both the soft strategy dimensions and the hard strategy dimensions. Therefore, one question that these findings raise is: do these interrelated high,

medium and low level-of-acceptance relationships imply a global model or are they just an anomaly of our study? Our findings do suggest that further investigation into the degree of global consistency of these relationships may be a worthwhile endeavor.

Focusing now on the cross-cultural similarities within this set of relationships, we have noted that the Dutch and American managers are extremely similar to one another in terms of both the soft influence strategy that they see as more acceptable and the hard influence strategy that they see as less acceptable to use. This case of culture similarities may be the least curious of our findings in that previous research, both empirical and anecdotal, have suggested that U.S. and Dutch ways of engaging in business are reasonably similar. For example, when the Hofstede and Bond (1988) dimensions are broken into quartiles, the U.S. and the Netherlands are in the same quartiles for Power Distance, Individualism-Collectivism and Confucian Dynamism.

On the other hand, we have noted a similar, although converse, trend occurring for the Hong Kong and Mexican Managers. However, the reasons underlying the similarity between a Far East and a Latin American cluster culture appear less obvious, but *not* contradictory to the cross-cultural values research. Hong Kong and Mexico are in adjacent Ronen and Shenkar (1985) country clusters, and both are relatively high on Power Distance and low on Individualism, with no measure of Confucian Dynamism being available for Mexico (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). One factor that might contribute to the explanation for these similarities focuses on the cultural importance of in-group relationships in Eastern and Latin cultures, and the relative unimportance, in these cultures, of people who are in one's out-group, in which the superior likely may be (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai & Lucca 1988). Another factor to consider might be the issue of economically developing versus economically developed countries, where the former may feel the need to catch-up at almost any cost, and thus be more willing to embrace the harder tactics. Additionally, one could postulate that, since both of these cultures have functioned under non-democratic rule for many years, it may be a political issue that helps to explain the similarities. Furthermore, looking at all six cultures in this study, a relationship between length of democracy and influence strategy preference seems to exist, with longer democratic rule and softer strategy having the apparently positive correlation. Thus, it seems worthwhile to explore the possibility that economic and/or political factors contribution to provide a more encompassing explanation for the cultural similarities and differences that were found.

Along the same line, the German and Indian managers similar and relatively moderate response patterns across all influence tactic categories is interesting. India, like Brazil, Japan and Israel, is designated by Ronen and Shenkar (1985) to be an Independent that does not fit into any of the country clusters. Culturally, India is Eastern, and it would seem logical that it should fit somewhat more closely with the Far East cluster (e.g., Hong Kong) than with the Germanic cluster of the Western cultures. However, we see that Germany and India are in the same Individualism-Collectivism quartile (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Additionally, India, like Hong Kong, had a long relationship with the British. Perhaps, the Hindu-based culture of India, in conjunction with their exposure to Western ideology and adoption of English as the language of business, has resulted in a *crossvergent* hybrid influence style (Ralston et al., 1997) that has evolved to be fairly similar to the German style, even if the cultures may not be that similar.

The latter two culture pairings are worthy of note in that they open the door for the question: are there factors other than culture that are having a significant impact on managerial perspectives of the appropriate styles of influence behavior? In addition, do we need to explicitly include these other factors in the equation when trying to study influence—or more generally, behavioral—differences across cultures? Furthermore, one might ask: does influence style behavior correspond with the general model of cross-cultural differences that has evolved from the values literature, or is influence style a unique-unto-itself aspect of culture that does not follow the norms derived from the values literature? These appear to be other issues that may provide a fruitful undertaking for future research.

Finally, in terms of differences that were found, a finding that may have serious implications in North America is the pronounced difference between the U.S. and Mexican managers on all four dimensions. This finding suggests that there is a great deal of divergence between these two NAFTA partners, and that a successful alliance is going to require substantial cultural sensitivity on the part of the business participants from both countries. Thus, this also appears to be a topic that deserves further scrutiny (Egri et al., 2000).

Unmistakably, this research has only begun to scratch the surface of the impact of culture—and perhaps the economic/political ideology—on upward influence preferences around the world. However, we believe that this study does highlight the importance of this issue for cross-cultural relationships, as well as for diversity issues within a single country. Additionally, the questions that this study has raised also appear to provide relevant starting points for future research endeavors. In summation, there is still much to learn about the different influence styles of managers

around the world. However, an understanding of these differences appears to be crucial, if we are going to be able to work together successfully.

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**TABLE 1****Standardized Means, Standard Deviations, ANOVA, and Duncan Multiple Comparison Test Results**

Dimension	Culture	Mean	SD	F	Group Differences <sup>1</sup> (p < .05)
GOOD SOLDIER	United States	6.82	1.44	277.31***	U & N > G & I > H > M
	Netherlands	6.53	1.72		
	Germany	4.47	1.81		
	India	4.42	1.91		
	Hong Kong	0.99	0.72		
	Mexico	0.78	2.04		
IMAGE MANAGEMENT	United States	2.29	1.86	52.05***	U & N > G & I > M > H
	Netherlands	2.04	2.01		
	Germany	1.48	1.52		
	India	1.27	1.55		
	Mexico	0.30	1.07		
	Hong Kong	-0.45	0.81		
INFORMATION CONTROL	Mexico	-0.28	2.66	133.32***	M > H > G > I > N > U
	Hong Kong	-1.66	1.11		
	Germany	-3.06	1.90		
	India	-3.65	1.62		
	Netherlands	-5.23	2.14		
	United States	-6.16	1.91		
STRONG-ARM COERCION	Mexico	-0.55	3.02	249.99***	M > H > G & I > U & N
	Hong Kong	-2.78	1.51		
	Germany	-4.92	1.52		
	India	-4.97	1.57		
	United States	-7.63	1.70		
	Netherlands	-7.78	0.57		

<sup>1</sup> Group abbreviations: G = Germany, H = Hong Kong, I = India, M = Mexico, N = Netherlands, U = United States,

\*\*\*  $p > .001$ .