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A cross-cultural study into peer evaluations of women's leadership effectiveness

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Purpose – The present paper is based on a cross-cultural exploration of middle managers in two diverse cultures and aims to focus on how the leadership styles of managerial women are perceived and evaluated. In particular, female and male peer evaluations of leadership effectiveness in Malaysia and Australia are to be explored.

Design/methodology/approach – Surveys from 324 middle managers from Malaysia and Australia were quantitatively analysed. The sample for the study was drawn from organisations in four industry types in both countries.

Findings – Findings suggest that evaluations of female managers' leadership styles in general, and within the respondent's own organisations, were strongly culture specific, especially in Malaysia. The results reflected the strongly held values, attitudes and beliefs of each country. While this is not unexpected, it does highlight a need to be cautious when interpreting Western research results and attempting to transplant those into other cultures. In Malaysia, female managers were not seen as effective in the leadership styles they adopted in their roles when compared to the Australian female managers' evaluations. Such an evaluation may have had little to do with an objective appraisal of the female managers' capability, but rather with a strongly held cultural belief about the appropriate role of women in society, and in organisations in particular.

Research limitations/implications – It is suggested that national culture manifests itself in the values, attitudes and behaviours of people. Cultural influences are therefore likely to impact on the way women and men behave in the workplace, particularly when roles of authority and power are evident, and the way in which that behaviour will be evaluated by others. Further research using different samples in different cultures are recommended. In addition, the influence of ethnicity, race or religion in plural countries such as Malaysia and Australia is also worthy of investigation.

Practical implications – This research suggests that values and attitudes are strongly culture-specific and therefore have the ability to influence evaluations at an organisational level. Such an awareness of cultural influences should guide appropriate human resource practices, particularly within a globalized environment.

Originality/value – The inclusion of a gender comparison in the data analysis in this paper is a significant attempt to add to the extant knowledge of the cross-cultural research. This is a unique contribution because of the omission of a gender perspective in the previous two seminal studies in culture literature (i.e. Hofstede and House *et al.*). In addition, the findings suggest that culture-specific influences are important determinants that impose expectations on the role of women differently from men in society and within organisations hence, making the gender comparison of the findings more significant.

Keyword(s): National cultures; Gender; Leadership; Management styles; Malaysia; Australia.

Introduction

The changing nature of organisations over the past two decades have brought about flatter organisational structures which require a more team oriented decision making approach. Exemplary

organisations have also placed a higher emphasis on continuous development and organisational learning. Therefore, the twenty-first century brings new challenges to organisational functioning, requiring re-thinking by human resource specialists and organisational behavioural theorists.

One significant change has been in the diversification of the workforce. There are now more women in the workplace and more women in management and senior leadership roles in organisations ([Davidson and Burke, 2004](#); [Eagly and Carli, 2003](#); [Kanter, 1997](#)) than previously. Many of the women who are making their way into management careers are equally or better qualified in terms of educational attainments than their male colleagues. For example, some management research projects reported that the sample of female managers has higher educational qualifications compared to their male colleagues ([Wood and Lindorff, 2001](#)).

In addition, the workforce is now made up of employees from various ethnic and racial groups from all around the world, creating a higher degree of cultural diversity. Such cultural diversity in contemporary organisations is accelerated by the globalisation of the market economy as more businesses become multinational in order to expand and remain profitable in the longer term. These radical changes in organisations require a deeper understanding of cultural issues that are likely to be influential in the organisational behaviour of a diverse workforce in contemporary organisations.

A review of the literature highlights an awareness that culture plays an important role in influencing the behaviours of people in different societies by exerting a clear influence on the different views and expectations of individuals in a given society with respect to the way things ought to be done ([Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 1993, 1998, 2001](#); [House et al., 2004](#); [House et al., 1999](#)). It follows therefore that such influences will also impact on the organisational behaviours of individuals in the workplace in different countries. However, Western research, theories and models have dominated the literature and are still utilised to understand organisational behaviours, and there has been an assumption that these findings will be applicable to all other countries. One example of this dominance is that Western contemporary literature acknowledges that organisations of today require a different leadership style to what was considered effective in the past. The consensus is that Transformational leadership is the style of leadership that is most strongly equated with effective leadership. However, these findings may not be appropriate outside the Western paradigm.

Building on the need for cross-cultural knowledge expansion and to explore the universality of Western findings, this paper aims to investigate one area of leadership by comparing middle managers from two diverse cultural settings in Malaysia and Australia. In particular, evaluations of the effectiveness of the leadership styles adopted by female managers are explored and whether there are gender differences in the peer evaluations of women's leadership styles are investigated. This paper will specifically contribute to an understanding of whether Western findings in relation to leadership evaluations of women are applicable to explain the experiences of female managers in diverse cultures.

Firstly, however the literature in relation to leadership evaluations of women and attributes that constitute leadership effectiveness will be discussed.

Contemporary leadership literature

Contemporary leadership theories began to emerge in the late 1970s, when Burns developed a comprehensive theory to explain the differences between the behaviours of political leaders by using the terms “transactional” and “transformational” leadership. He initiated the development of the currently prominent transformational leadership theory. In contrasting the two leadership styles, Burns defined transactional leaders as people who emphasized work standards, and had task oriented aims ([Burns, 1978](#); [Mandell and Pherwani, 2003](#)). Transactional leaders were people who performed their leadership within the organisational constraints and adhered to the present organisational rules and regulations ([Bass and Avolio, 1993](#); [Ogbonna and Harris, 2000](#)). These leaders' aimed at making sure

that all the regular organisational tasks were completed on time. This was usually achieved through rewards or disciplining of followers in the style of a transaction. The implicit understanding was of a task needing to be carried out and if satisfactorily completed, the reward would be forthcoming. Such reward based action was intended to influence and improve employee performance ([Bass and Avolio, 1993](#); [Burns, 1978](#)).

In contrast, transformational leaders were defined as people with inspirational values. They exhibited nurturing, caring and displayed consideration towards their followers. Transformational leaders were believed to have the ability to identify prospects in their followers and then to encourage and motivate them to develop to their fullest potential and hence achieve personal and organisational goals ([Burns, 1978](#)). These leaders also were considered to have the capacity for developing and fostering self worth and self confidence amongst their staff.

In addition, the transformational leadership style emerged as the most appropriate style of leading in contemporary organisations in the West where external changes in the environment are rapid ([Mandell, 2003](#); [Omar and Davidson, 2001](#); [Wood and Jogulu, 2006](#)). Such dramatic changes in the environment accompanied by diversity in the workforce have instigated the emergence of transformational leadership to become the prominent leadership profile in contemporary organisational settings. Furthermore, transformational leadership has achieved prominence because it is a style built around behavioural attributes which inspire, empower, nurture and develop staff. It is also seen as visionary with long term direction and planning capacity ([Avolio et al., 1991](#); [Bass, 1999](#); [Eagly et al., 2003](#); [Seltzer and Bass, 1990](#)). Transformational leaders are described as inspirational people who constantly communicate organisational vision, direction and strategies to their followers. These leaders aspire to transform the internal organisational practices to better fit the changes that are happening in the external environment. In addition, they are characterised by thinking beyond internal workplace constraints through initially understanding and adapting to the existing work culture and subsequently attempt to expand the organisational culture to better fit the global surroundings.

Furthermore, over a decade ago, Western management writers have highlighted that the transformational leadership approach is effective in terms of bringing about organisational changes ([Avolio et al., 1991](#); [Bennis and Nanus, 1985](#); [Tichy and Devanna, 1986](#); [Tichy and Ulrich, 1984](#)). These researchers stressed that “transformational leaders help to realign the values and norms” ([Avolio et al., 1991](#), p. 9) of an organisation to promote change and hence are able to effectively lead the contemporary workplace and workforce. Realigning organisational values by changing management practices and focusing on subordinate involvement and empowerment are some of the valuable strategies frequently exhibited by transformational leaders when organisations encounter severe crises ([Avolio et al., 1991](#); [Van Engen et al., 2001](#)).

Another significant finding that came out of the contemporary leadership research is the understanding that transformational leadership behaviours to a large extent exemplify feminine type behaviours built around female innate qualities such as nurturing, caring, participative, consultative, compassionate, concern, respect, equality and consideration ([Carless, 1998](#); [Helgesen, 1990](#); [Loden, 1985](#); [Van Engen et al., 2001](#); [Yammarino et al., 1997](#)). This is an interesting and important finding which suggests that female managers would be able to exhibit transformational leadership more easily and frequently compared to their male counterparts.

However, as noted previously, the majority of the literature reviewed above reflects a Western perspective. It is possible that behavioural expectations of women and men within non-Western societies and organisations differ and the difference may have an impact on the leadership style exhibited, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of such styles. In Western cultures, research in this area has suggested that evaluations of women in leadership roles may be subject to bias. Even when women hold leadership roles, and are competent, skilful and effective, this does not necessarily guarantee that women will advance into executive leadership roles in proportionate numbers to their male colleagues ([Heilman, 2001](#)). This suggests that evaluation of leadership as exhibited by male and

female managers may be influential in the different rates of career advancement reported in the Western literature and will be discussed next.

Evaluation of leaders

In general, leadership evaluation in organisations has been reported to be skewed, discriminatory and prejudiced due to the absence of clear guidelines in the evaluation processes ([Heilman, 2001](#)). It has been suggested that the paucity of women in senior organisational echelons may be “a consequence of gender bias in evaluations” ([Heilman, 2001](#), p. 657). Gender stereotypes are strong hindrances that impact on the evaluation of female leaders in organisations. Stereotypes held about women construct the perception of “what women are like” and “how they should behave” ([Heilman, 2001](#), p. 657). These perceptions may contribute to the under-evaluation of women's competencies and delay the recognition they are entitled to receive in order to move ahead in organisations, particularly when women perform well in domains that have been seen as male oriented. For example, when women are evaluated as competent in a male sex-typed role, they are disliked more than their male colleagues ([Eagly, 2007](#); [Heilman, 2001](#)). Such stereotypes are capable of influencing the evaluation of leaders.

The literature has suggested that the evaluation of women in both management and leadership roles has often been highly subjective and in many cases this has led to inequalities in promotion opportunities between female and male managers ([Heilman, 1995, 2001](#)). Evidence suggests that the lack of systematic criteria and well structured guidelines about evaluation processes in organisations offer a possible explanation for prejudiced decision making to continue, which effects the progression of women into senior managerial roles in many organisations. Lack of clear guidelines allows subjective interpretation of what is considered appropriate rather than objective guidelines based on equity and principles of merit. In such an environment, gender stereotypes may come into play.

According to [Eagly and Makhijani \(1992, p. 3\)](#), despite female managers possessing the appropriate characteristics that are suitable in contemporary conditions and exhibiting leadership styles that have been rated highly effective for today's organisations (i.e. transformational leadership), these “women's credentials and performance are not fairly evaluated”. Similar views are expressed by [Snyder\(1993\)](#) who reported that “women were significantly better performers than men in many of the foundation skills required for effective leadership” ([Snyder, 1993](#), p. 101). Despite this, it is obvious that women are more likely to experience “disadvantages from prejudicial evaluations of their competence as leaders” more so compared to their male counterparts ([Eagly and Carli, 2003](#), p. 807).

According to [Eagly and Makhijani\(1992\)](#) the issue of evaluation bias is particularly noticeable when female leaders' exhibit an autocratic or directive style of leadership, as this style does not appear to complement the stereotype of female behaviour. A similar conclusion was reported by [Rutherford \(2001\)](#). In her study, women were generally evaluated negatively when they exhibited leadership characteristics that were seen to exemplify men, i.e. task oriented, directive or autocratic behaviours; these characteristics are not seen as appropriate for women. Furthermore, when women display similar traits to men, they are often criticised as being “masculine” ([Rutherford, 2001](#)).

Other studies have reported how similar behaviours by women and men in the workplace can be valued differently ([Heilman, 2001](#)). For example when male managers exhibit feminine leadership characteristics which involve participation in decision making, caring or showing empathy and people oriented behaviours ([Eagly and Makhijani, 1992](#)) these men are not only evaluated positively, their actions are also seen to enhance their masculine virtue. However, the reverse is reported to be true when women exhibit male characteristics i.e. in these circumstances women who exhibit forceful or decisive actions are likely to receive negative evaluation because this behaviour clashes with the sex role stereotype of being a woman.

Therefore, when women do desire to progress into senior roles and leadership positions in organisations, they are more likely to be evaluated negatively based on “lack of person-job-fit”

because senior roles and leadership position in organisations have been seen as occupations that are a male domain ([Lyness and Heilman, 2006](#)). Hence, when women are categorised as a lack of fit to perform careers which are seen as male dominated, it is more likely that the behaviour of women will be under-evaluated ([Lyness and Heilman, 2006](#)).

In summary, the review of the literature on evaluation of leaders appears to suggest that evaluation processes in organisations have the potential for bias and when this occurs, they have the capacity to strongly influence the career progression of female and male managers. Such biases may also influence the evaluation of the effectiveness of the leadership skills of managers. However, these findings are predominantly reported in the United States. In terms of studies outside developed countries very little has been found specifically in the area of evaluation of leadership effectiveness. One such study focussed on general experiences of women in management in Asian countries and the cultural barriers they face. [Yukongdi and Benson \(2006\)](#) found that Asian women in organisations are denied promotion due to stereotypical views that women are viewed as primarily carers and home makers on the societal hierarchical strata. Women in Asian countries were specifically discriminated against because men are traditionally perceived and viewed as more suitable and appropriate for senior organisational roles ([Yukongdi and Benson, 2006](#)).

One further study by [Mansor, \(1994\)](#) found that employers in Malaysian organisations are hesitant to hire or promote women in leadership roles in organisations due to a traditional belief that Malaysian women will not be eligible for such roles. Such strong attitudes toward Malaysian women are based on a stereotypical view that these women are better suited for family responsibilities, more so than executives and senior managers in the workplace. These authors (e.g. [Mansor, 1994](#) and [Yukongdi and Benson, 2006](#)) concluded that Asian culture plays an important role in influencing the underutilization of women in managerial roles despite the increasing number of women participating in the labour force.

The present study aims to explore how female middle managers in similar industry classifications, are evaluated by their peers in terms of their leadership effectiveness. A cross-cultural analysis will be made as the sample is drawn from Australia and Malaysia. To facilitate this exploration a brief background on the cultural influences of these two countries will precede the methodology of the study.

Background to Malaysian culture

Malaysia is an Islamic nation with a diverse population of Malays, Chinese and Indians and hence retains an interesting mix of Asian values and cultural attributes ([Kennedy, 2002](#)). In contemporary society, the Malaysian societal formation is overlaid by Islamic beliefs and values which dictate appropriate behavioural practices. In addition, a blend of British colonial management philosophies and Chinese and Indian cultural and religious practices were incorporated into Malaysian society ([Kennedy, 2002](#)). This has created a unique society of cultural values which aims to blend an understanding of respect and harmony between its various multiethnic communities.

This multiethnic society traditionally based their values on a heritage of communal living and working towards achieving collective rewards, shared knowledge and equal distribution of resources to accomplish common goals. Hence, Malaysia has been categorised as a collectivist society ([Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005](#)). As individuals belonging to a collectivist community, Malaysians show concern for others, are tolerant of errors, generous and friendly and sensitive towards others as part of their communal living practice ([Kennedy, 2002](#)). These behavioural practices are usually observed among individuals within the racial groups.

In collectivist societies such as Malaysia, communal living customs are imperative in order to sustain harmony. Therefore, behaviours such as assertiveness, confrontation, and aggressiveness are discouraged among individuals. Culture places strong constraints on individuals, and in relation to

managers in organisations, they are often not prepared to speak up or voice their opinions to their superiors based on the cultural apprehension of being arrogant ([Abdullah, 2001](#); [Schermmerhorn, 1994](#)).

Furthermore, in collectivist societies, hierarchies are usually acknowledged as part of the societal formation and hence there is acceptance of authority figures across many levels of society i.e. government structure, village formation and within the family. Various examples of these societal arrangements are that the *Sultan* is the head of state; a *Penghulu* is the term for the village headman, and *Bapa* or father is the head of the family. Therefore, the culture has inherently placed males in a position of power and authority across the nations at each layer of the multiethnic society.

It is anticipated that such strong cultural norms would exert influences on how individuals are expected to behave and operate in organisations generally and more specifically may dictate the appropriate behaviours of female and male managers. If this is the case, it is likely that the evaluation of effective leadership practices will also be effected, particularly if one sex is considered to be a more appropriate “fit” in leadership roles. Therefore, an exploration about how peers evaluate the leadership effectiveness of female managers as compared to male managers, will be illuminating in a culture where leadership styles are still seen to be strongly paternalistic due to the nature of existing hierarchies in the society ([Abdullah, 2001](#); [Sulaiman et al., 1999](#)). It is hypothesised that this strong early history which reserved leadership roles for males and continues to do so is likely to have serious implications on how women will be evaluated and viewed as leaders in organisations. It appears that an evaluation of leadership in such an environment would be likely to focus positively on male rather than female attributes, as it will be strongly influenced by the dominant culture of the country.

Background to Australian culture

Australia has been clustered as an individualist society ([Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005](#)) where individual expression is very dominant and highly valued. The early colonial history exerted a strong impact on people to be individualistic, to believe in themselves and have high levels of self esteem, to have a strong tendency to be independent, and to hold firm beliefs in relation to a “fair go”. These qualities are evident in the early colonisation and later immigration because the environment was very harsh in the early days. Furthermore, the colony was male dominated at all levels of power, and this made it difficult for women to achieve any real independence. Presumably this early history would have forged a strong character in both women and men to survive both economically and physically.

In contemporary settings, it would be expected that such values would also foster an appreciation of equal opportunities among individuals, which would influence the way they behave in the families, organisations and society. Such values and attitudes may impact on the behaviours of women and men, particularly where roles of authority and power are evident, such as in management or leadership positions.

One significant illustration of how culture can influence management roles was reported by [Still\(2006\)](#) when she concluded that the strong Australian “macho” culture underpins the progress of more men than women into important roles in management. Roles of power and authority have traditionally been seen as a male domain. As a consequence, leadership roles have been stereotyped as occupations more suitable for men more than for women ([Still, 2006](#)), and Australian women have been perceived as not a “fit” in senior executive roles in the workplace.

This pervasive attitude has been instrumental in negative stereotypes of women in management roles. According to [Sinclair\(1998\)](#) negative stereotypes held toward women are capable of expanding into all aspects of senior appointments in powerful positions across organisations in the nation. Therefore, it is likely that women's progression into such roles are disadvantaged through systematic discrimination and a double standard widely practised in organisations ([Sinclair, 1998](#); [Still, 2004, 2006](#)). This phenomenon appears to be incongruous in a country where social policies and legislations

relating to equal employment and affirmative action practices have been in operation for more than 20 years.

It is likely that these culture specific behaviours such as independence, individualism and dislike of authority in Australia continue to impact on the behaviours and expectations held towards women and men. It is also anticipated that women's leadership effectiveness will be evaluated more equally to men because of the egalitarian context of the societal formation.

As discussed, the cultural differences in the two diverse countries studied highlighted divergence in cultural dimensions as well as influences on attitudes towards the roles of males and females in an organisational setting. It is hypothesised that the cultures of the two countries represented in the current study will impact strongly on attitudes and perceptions of effective leadership.

Methodology

Questions were designed to examine how female and male middle managers evaluate women in terms of their leadership effectiveness “in general” and “in your own organisation”. This approach provided an avenue to tap the perception of whether women are evaluated equally as effective leaders compared to their male counterparts in general, and in particular, in relation to the respondents' own specific organisations.

Middle managers were defined as the second tier managers in organisations who reported to a superior and at the same time had one or more staff reporting to them. In this study, all middle managers had other staff members reporting to them, and hence evaluations of their leadership effectiveness were sought. While it is acknowledged that not all managers are leaders, because of the nature of other staff reporting to them, it is proposed that all managers have the scope to display leadership skills and styles when carrying out their roles. According to [Howell and Costley \(2006, p. 8\)](#), “the same individuals usually perform both activities” as their roles are designed to influence employees achieve organisational goals.

Two questions were asked of respondents; both were exactly the same except for the phrase that differentiated the targeted group of women; “women in general” and “women in your organisation”. Pre-coded questions provided respondents with a choice of answers that ranged from “not as effective as leaders compared to their male colleagues”; “Equally as effective as leaders compared to their male colleagues”; “More effective as leaders to their male colleagues”; and “Don't know”.

A total of 324 middle managers took part; 191 middle managers were from Malaysia (109 male and 82 female middle managers) and 133 were Australian middle managers (76 male and 57 female middle managers). The sample for the study was drawn from organisations in four industry types in both Malaysia and Australia. The four industries involved in the present study are manufacturing, transport, postal and warehousing, information media and telecommunications and financial and insurance services. Large organisations were chosen for the study in order to obtain adequate numbers of middle managers in both countries. The rationale for selecting organisations from similar industry types was to explore the similarities and differences in relation to an evaluation of women in leadership positions in similar industry settings, but with different cultural backgrounds.

Filling in the questionnaire and returning it to the researcher implied consent to participate in the study. To increase the response rates, the human resource department was asked to send a follow up email to all potential respondents after two weeks. In this way, a response rate of 76 per cent for Malaysia and 67 per cent for Australia was achieved. [Table I](#) outlines the demographic characteristics of the sample by country.

Results

[Table I](#) summarises the demographic characteristics of the sample by country. [Table II](#) outlines the results obtained for the first research question on an evaluation of women in general in terms of their leadership effectiveness in Malaysia. In terms of the Malaysian sample, a higher percentage of female managers in the sample (74 per cent) compared to 56 per cent of male managers felt that women in general were equally as effective as leaders. However, more male managers (39 per cent) felt that women in general were not as effective as their male colleagues, compared to female managers (17 per cent). Small proportion of males (3 per cent) and females (9 per cent) indicated that women's leadership styles are more effective than their male counterparts. A Fisher's exact test value and Mann-Whitney tests results suggest that there is a significant relationship between gender of the respondents and their evaluation of women's leadership styles in general, with Malaysian female managers being more likely to evaluate their female peers positively compared to their male counterparts.

[Table III](#) outlines the results for the Australian sample. Almost similar percentages of Australian female middle managers (81 per cent) and male middle managers (83 per cent) stated that women in general were equally as effective as their male colleagues in terms of their leadership. Four female (7 per cent) and eight male (11 per cent) respondents commented that women are not as effective as leaders compared to their male colleagues. Seven percent of female respondents in this group felt that women in general were more effective as leaders compared to 4 per cent of their male counterparts. The Fisher's exact test as well as the Mann-Whitney tests did not report any significant relationship between the responses of the Australian female and male managers on this question. In essence, the majority of female and male managers in the Australian sample evaluated women positively.

The second question enabled an exploration of how female managers are evaluated by their peers (i.e. both male and female middle managers) in organisations in Malaysia and Australia in terms of their leadership style.

More than half of the Malaysian female managers (67 per cent) believed women in their organisation were "equally as effective as leaders compared to their male colleagues" with 7 per cent responding more positively by stating that women in their organisation are more effective as leaders compared to their male counterparts. However, almost a quarter (23 per cent) of female managers in the sample indicated that women in their organisation were not as effective as leaders. On the other hand, slightly more than half (57 per cent) of the Malaysian male managers stated that their female peers in their present organisation were equally effective as their male colleagues, with more than a third (38 per cent) believing that female managers in their organisation were not as effective as leaders compared to the male managers. The Fisher's exact test and Mann-Whitney tests reported significant relationship between gender and the evaluation of women's leadership styles in the respondents' organisations; female managers were more likely to evaluate their female peers more positively compared to the male respondents in the sample (see [Table IV](#)).

[Table V](#) outlines the Australian responses. Seventy one percent of the Australian female managers stated that women were equally effective in their leadership. Only 11 percent of this group indicated a more optimistic view that women in their own organisation are more effective as leaders compared to their male colleagues, with similar proportions (11 per cent) viewing other women in their organisation as not effective in terms of their leadership styles. Again a small number of the female managers in Australia (7 per cent) responded "don't know" for this question. The Australian male managers overall expressed a slightly more positive appraisal about women in their organisation. The vast majority of men (82 per cent) are of the view that women in their own organisation are equally as effective as leaders compared to their male colleagues, while 17 per cent of this group evaluated women negatively in their workplace. Fisher's exact test as well as Mann-Whitney tests results reported no significant difference in the responses of the males and females.

Discussion

In the Malaysian sample, there were significant differences on this measure. In particular, female managers were significantly more likely to evaluate other women's leadership style as equally effective as men in general, as well as in their specific organisation. The Malaysian male managers in the sample rated women in general as well as their female colleagues in their own organisation negatively in terms of their leadership style, and these results were the most negative compared to all four managerial groups in the two countries.

One interpretation of the evaluations of female manager's leadership styles suggests that the Malaysian female managers in the present sample are more positive in their evaluation of their female colleagues, because of the increasing numbers of women's participation in paid employment in Malaysia ([Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2004](#)), and a higher profile and acceptance of women in management and leadership roles in contemporary Malaysian organisations. It may also reflect high aspirations to achieve senior leadership roles similar to their male counterparts in their organisations.

Another explanation to account for the positive evaluations of the Malaysian women's perceptions and evaluations can be related to the increase in their educational qualifications. That is, the educational qualifications of Malaysian women have increased dramatically over the years with more female students enrolling in tertiary level education. For example, in 2005 female students made up approximately 63.4 per cent of the enrolments in public universities in bachelors degree; 48.8 per cent were pursuing masters' degree and 35.7 per cent of students were undertaking doctorate level programs ([The Economic Planning Unit, 2006](#)). Furthermore, over a decade ago [Mansor, \(1994\)](#) reported that female students in Malaysia were beginning to expand their areas of studies into fields that had once been predominantly male dominated (e.g. engineering, law, accounting, business and economics). It is likely that these changes in demographic representation of tertiary level courses by female students would go some way toward creating higher levels of aspirations toward more senior roles within organisations. These attitudes reflect a significant change in what has been a traditional stereotype of the role of women in the Malaysian cultural context.

In contrast, the Malaysian male managers' negative appraisal of women's leadership styles suggests a general stereotype held toward women which is culturally specific. It is possible that effective leadership characteristics continue to be seen as an attribute commonly found in male managers rather than female managers. In addition, because of the strong cultural expectation of the role of women in Malaysian society, the male managers in the Malaysian sample may view women as better suited to the roles of mothers and wives.

Gender stereotyping continues to be recognised as a significant factor in evaluations of the attributes ascribed to successful managers. In her studies over the years, Virginia Schein summarised that gender stereotyping has not changed dramatically among male managers or male management students for over three decades. This research has been replicated across diverse countries such as the United States, Germany, Britain, Japan and China ([Schein, 1973, 1975, 1994, 1996, 2001](#); [Schein and Mueller, 1992](#)). Hence, the views of the Malaysian male managers in the current research may be reflecting a general stereotypical evaluation similar to that reported in Schein's studies. Her findings have often been referred to as the “think manager, think male” phenomenon.

In addition, stereotypes are capable of influencing promotion practices and career advancement opportunities in organisations. Strong negative evaluations held about the effectiveness of women's leadership in general, and women in the evaluator's organisation, can impact on the opportunities for female managers to progress in their management careers. As most senior decision making roles continue to be held by males in organisations, on-going negative stereotypical attitudes offer an explanation why women are not making their way into senior managerial and leadership roles in Malaysia at the same pace as their male colleagues ([Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2004](#)). Furthermore, the persistence of negative stereotypes points to some serious ramifications for the career advancement of women in Malaysia in the future, and for the need for vigilant Human

Resource practices to ensure organisations are able to recruit, retain and promote the best possible candidates of either sex.

The findings of the present study suggest that the cultural context of a society will impact on the resulting values, attitudes and behaviours of the people. For instance, in Malaysia, the tradition of placing men as authority figures across all levels of society, organisations and families severely disadvantages women. Such culture specific norms have the capacity to influence Human Resource practices and policies in organisations particularly where staff recruitment and promotion opportunities are concerned, as well as expectations about acceptable roles for women and men.

In comparison, the ratings of Australian female and male managers appear to be broadly similar. That is, both female and male middle managers in the Australian sample evaluated women in general and women in their own organisation favourably, suggesting a cultural influence in which, in theory at least, equality between roles of women and men is seen as appropriate. In [Hofstede's \(1980\)](#) cultural dimensions, Australia was clustered as a low “power distance” country as well as a highly “individualistic” society. This suggests that the Australian employee will value a more egalitarian workplace, and the opportunity to express themselves in a consultative open way. It is likely that such an environment will create less pressure on women and men by not influencing or dictating the behaviours and roles that are deemed appropriate in either sex in society in general, as well as within organisations.

Such a positive and liberal cultural environment could be expected to foster attitudes of acceptance toward equality in leadership roles and hence explains the positive evaluation of effectiveness of leadership behaviours amongst Australian female and male managers in organisations in general. Although these similarities in the evaluations of both female and male managers in the Australian sample appear to indicate that women's attributes and presence are recognised and valued at an organisational level, the reality of the low proportions of female managers who achieve senior or executive roles such as chief executive officer or board membership suggest something different. Currently, there are 3 per cent of CEOs and 8.7 per cent of board directors in Australian ASX200 companies who are women ([EOWA, 2006](#)). Perhaps, both Australian female and male middle managers presented an ideal assessment in their evaluation of female managers' effectiveness. However, it is recognised that middle managers do not make decisions on the selection and recruitment of the senior managerial appointments and a sample of senior managers may respond differently to this question.

Conclusion

In summary, the peer evaluation of women's leadership styles in general and in specific organisations, highlighted different results for male and female managers in Malaysia and similar results between the male and female managers in the Australian sample. The results of this peer evaluation presented a snapshot of how female managers are perceived differently in terms of the effectiveness of the leadership styles they adopt. That is, the strong cultural influences in Malaysia appear to have exerted negative evaluations on women's leadership effectiveness because of a perceived role conflict for women to be in figures of authority. The Australian manager's evaluations of women's leadership effectiveness were more positive, and are seen as a reflection of a more egalitarian societal arrangement. It is acknowledged, however, that a positive evaluation by middle managers does not translate into an increase in the numbers of women holding leadership positions in Australia.

Finally, this research suggests that values and attitudes are strongly culture specific and therefore have the ability to influence evaluations at an organisational level. Such an awareness of cultural influences should guide appropriate Human Resource practices, particularly within a globalized environment. In addition, the present study highlights that research findings obtained in Western cultures may not be transferable into developing cultures due to the variation in culture specific expectations that are exerted on women's and men's roles and responsibilities in the society.

	Malaysia		Australia	
	Male (%) (n = 109)	Female (%) (n = 82)	Male (%) (n = 76)	Female (%) (n = 57)
<i>Age</i>				
Under 30	25	28	16	20
31-34	14	26	16	14
35-39	19	12	20	21
40-44	21	13	17	20
45-49	11	12	13	16
50-54	8	7	10	9
55-59	2	1	8	0
<i>Education qualification</i>				
Below year 12 secondary school	5	10	8	12
Year 12 and high school	N/A	N/A	14	14
TAFE or college/diploma	17	24	14	9
Undergraduate degree	51	34	37	25
Postgraduate degree	19	21	22	40
Others, e.g. secretarial course, ACCA, CIMA, professional certificate	8	11	4	0
<i>Living arrangement</i>				
Single (including divorced, separated, widowed)	18	49	15	23
Married or partnership	81	51	84	74
Others, e.g. living with parents, in a relationship but not legally married/partnered	1	0	1	3
<i>Number of children</i>				
No children	34	60	32	46
1 to 2 children	40	29	46	40
More than 3 children	26	11	22	14

Table I.
Main demographic characteristics of the sample by sex

Table I Main demographic characteristics of the sample by sex

Malaysian managers	In terms of leadership styles, women in general are:			
	Not as effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	Equally effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	More effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	Do not know
<i>Male</i>				
Per cent	39	56	3	3
n	42	61	3	3
<i>Female</i>				
Per cent	17	74	9	0
n	14	61	7	0
<i>Total</i>				
Per cent	29	64	5	2
n	56	122	10	3

Notes: Fisher's exact test = 14.77; $p < 0.01$; Cramer's V = 0.28; Mann-Whitney U = 3244 ($Z = -3.56$; $p < 0.01$)

Table II.
Evaluation of leadership style of women in general (Malaysian sample)

Table II Evaluation of leadership style of women in general (Malaysian sample)

Australian managers	In terms of leadership styles, women in general are:			
	Not as effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	Equally effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	More effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	Do not know
<i>Male</i>				
Per cent	11	83	4	3
<i>n</i>	8	62	3	2
<i>Female</i>				
Per cent	7	81	7	5
<i>n</i>	4	46	4	3
<i>Total</i>				
Per cent	9	82	5	4
<i>n</i>	12	108	7	5

Table III. Evaluation of leadership style of women in general (Australian sample)

Notes: Fisher's exact test = 1.72; $p > 0.01$; Cramer's V 0.11; Mann-Whitney U = 1812 ($Z = -0.97$; $p > 0.01$)

Table III Evaluation of leadership style of women in general (Australian sample)

Malaysian managers	In terms of leadership styles, women in your organisation are:			
	Not as effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	Equally effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	More effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	Do not know
<i>Male</i>				
Per cent	38	57	2	4
<i>n</i>	41	62	2	4
<i>Female</i>				
Per cent	23	67	7	2
<i>n</i>	19	55	6	2
<i>Total</i>				
Per cent	31	61	4	3
<i>n</i>	60	117	8	6

Table IV. Evaluation of leadership style of women in respondent's organisation (Malaysian sample)

Notes: Fisher's exact test = 7.35; $p < 0.1$; Cramer's V = 0.2; Mann-Whitney U = 3426 ($Z = -2.54$; $p < 0.01$)

Table IV Evaluation of leadership style of women in respondent's organisation (Malaysian sample)

Australian managers	In terms of leadership styles, women in your organisation are:			
	Not as effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	Equally effective as leaders compared with their male colleagues	More effective as: leaders compared with their male colleagues	Do not know
<i>Male</i>				
Per cent	17	82	1	0
<i>n</i>	13	62	1	0
<i>Female</i>				
Per cent	11	71	11	7
<i>n</i>	6	40	6	4
<i>Total</i>				
Per cent	14	77	5	3
<i>n</i>	19	102	7	4

Table V. Evaluation of leadership style of women in respondent's organisation (Australian sample)

Notes: Fisher's exact test = 6.34; $p > 0.01$; Cramer's V = 0.3; Mann-Whitney U = 1700 ($Z = -1.91$; $p > 0.01$)

Table V Evaluation of leadership style of women in respondent's organisation (Australian sample)

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