On becoming a leader in Asia and America:

Empirical evidence from women managers

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**Abstract**

In concordance with recent calls for cross-cultural leadership research as well as research on women leaders, this study investigated how women in Asia and the U.S. become leaders and how they enact their leadership. In-depth interviews with 76 mid- to upper-level female managers in Asia (China, India, Singapore) and the U.S. were conducted. Analyses revealed that a simple dichotomy of "Asian" versus "Western" leadership did not appropriately describe the data. Rather, factors such as achievement orientation, learning orientation, and role models emerged as crucial success factors for advancement to leadership positions across continents. However, the particular meaning differed between countries. Furthermore, with regard to women's leadership style differences between Asian countries were more salient than between Asia and the U.S.. Implications for leadership theory and practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* Asia, United States, leadership, women managers

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Asian economies have become increasingly important global players (Cappelli, Singh, Singh, & Useem, 2010), and Singapore's economy is one of the most innovative (The Global Innovation Index, 2012) and competitive (Global Competitiveness Report 2012-2013) economy worldwide. As a result, there is a necessity to learn more about the way business works in Asia, particularly with regard to leadership, one of the major determinants of organizational success (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

Although cross-cultural leadership research has flourished in recent years (e.g., House, Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, & de Luque, 2014; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Javidan, Dorfman, Howell, & Hanges, 2010), the clear demand for cross-cultural analyses of leadership persists (e.g., Bryman, 2004; Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010; Lau, 2002). In particular, more research on the specific facets of leadership in India (e.g., Palrecha, Spangler, & Yammarino, 2012), China (e.g., Chan, Huang, Snape, & Lam, 2013), and Singapore (e.g., Toor & Ofori, 2009) has been called for. Furthermore, even though leader emergence has received attention in recent years (Javidan & Carl, 2005), the emergence of women leaders has been understudied in general (Gardner, et al., 2010), and in cross-cultural leadership research in particular (Bullough, Kroeck, Newburry, Kundu, & Lowe, 2012).

Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate how women emerge as leaders in China, India, and Singapore, and how the success factors and barriers compare to those reported by women leaders in the U.S. Second, this research aims at analyzing how women in these countries lead and whether their leadership styles are more similar among Asian countries than between Asia and the U.S..

**Women Leaders in Asia and America**

Although the number of women leaders in business organizations has more than doubled over the last 30 years, women are still underrepresented in managerial positions worldwide (Catalyst, 2012). Compared to the U.S. and Europe, the proportion of women on corporate boards and in executive committees in Asian countries is even lower. On average, women account for only six percent of seats on corporate boards in the ten largest economies in Asia and eight percent of members of executive committees, compared to 15 percent and 14 percent in the U.S., respectively (McKinsey & Company, 2012). There are, however, significant differences between Asian countries. While women hold eight percent of corporate board seats in China, and seven percent in Singapore, the number drops to five percent in India. Similarly, women make up nine percent of the members of executive committees in China and 15 percent in Singapore, but only three percent in India (McKinsey & Company, 2012). As women evidently constitute a minority in leadership positions, the factors that impact their emergence as leaders–success factors as well as barriers–are important to understand.

**Success Factors for Advancement**

In an early approach to explaining how women advance to leadership positions, Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) distinguished between factors at four levels of analysis: (1) Individual, (2) interpersonal, (3) organizational, and (4) social systems. The *individual level* focuses upon the resources of an individual, such as achievement orientation or career aspirations. The *interpersonal level* focuses on relationships with subordinates, peers, and in particular supervisors. Since personal relationships may serve the function of role modeling, we also consider role models on the interpersonal level (cf. Gibson, 2004). The *organizational level*

captures practices related to selection and promotion. The *social systems level* focuses on society at large and comprises factors such as gender stereotypes.

Investigations of the success factors for advancement to leadership positions based on this model point to the particular importance of career encouragement (Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994) as well as managerial aspirations and masculinity for women (Tharenou, 2001). However, it is unclear to what extend these findings from Australia apply in Asian cultures, especially since the female gender role in Asia has been described as being dominated by traditionally feminine role expectations (e.g., taking care of children; Lyness & Judiesch, 2008).

**Barriers to Advancement**

The barriers to women's advancement can also be grouped into individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal level factors: Women's lower levels of self-confidence or propensity to assert self-interests (individual level) and a lack of access to powerful networks or the absence of role models (interpersonal level) as well as biased recruiting and selection practices in organizations (organizational level) have been discussed as major barriers (see Peus & Traut-Mattausch, 2007, for a summary). Among the factors that have been regarded as most obstructive for women's advancement to leadership positions are gender stereotypes (see Heilman, 2012, for an overview). This is due to the fact that stereotypes operate at the social systems level and thereby influence the lower levels.

**Gender stereotypes.** Gender stereotypes are generalizations about the attributes of men and women that are shared in a society. They have both descriptive components (i.e., how women and men *are*) and prescriptive components (i.e., how women and men *should or should not be*; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The lack of concordance between the attributes women are thought to possess and the ones that are regarded as necessary for leadership positions (Heilman,

2012) result in *negative performance expectations* for women, diminishing their chances of being hired into such jobs and negatively affecting their performance evaluations (Heilman & Haynes, 2008) or important career decisions (e.g., consideration for international assignments; Stroh, Varma, & Valy-Durbin, 2000). Due to prescriptive gender stereotypes women in leadership positions face a *double bind*: In order to be regarded as competent business leaders, they are required to show agentic behaviors (e.g., assertiveness, ambition); however, in order not to violate the prescriptive stereotypes associated with their gender role, they must also show communal behaviors such as being warm, sensitive, and caring (Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). These same prescriptive stereotypes imply that women should take care of their families; however, *caregiving roles* are seen as incongruent with leadership roles due to the long work hours and high levels of commitment required (Byron, 2005).

Cross-cultural comparisons of stereotypes pertaining to women, men, and managers are scarce. However, some evidence points to the fact that the think-manager-think-male phenomenon is evident in the U.S. as well as Asia (Schein, 2001), but that it might be more pronounced in Asia. Initial research points to the fact that women in Asia particularly struggle to combine family and work commitments (e.g., Lyness & Judiesch, 2008).

**Cultural values and gender stereotypes in Asia.** In general, cultural values have been shown to impact gender role attitudes in organizational contexts. For example, managers' traditional gender role attitudes are positively related to a nation's power distance (Parboteeah, Hoegl, & Cullen, 2008). Furthermore, the macro-environment has been found to impact the way individuals pursue their careers (Joplin, Shaffer, Francesco, & Lau, 2003). In the following, we provide a summary of the economic situation and cultural values in China, India, and Singapore and discuss how gender stereotypes might impact women's advancement to leadership positions.

*China.* China has attracted a lot of attention in management research lately (e.g., Bloom, Genakos, Sadun, & Van Reenen, 2012) due to its transition from an agricultural to an industrialized economy (Leung, 2002), from centralization to market-orientation, and from dominant Confucianism and Socialism to diverse ideologies with emerging capitalist values (Wang, Wang, Ruona, & Rojewski, 2005). Although traditional gender roles still exist, especially in rural areas, socialist China's promotion of gender equality overall has facilitated more "liberal orientations towards women's combining economic and family roles" (Shu & Zhu, 2012, p. 1103).

*India.* India has also received a lot of attention in management research lately (e.g., Palrecha, et al., 2012); still, there is a scarcity of empirical examinations of emerging patterns of Human Resource Management in the new Indian economic environment (Budhwar & Varma, 2010), including the role of women leaders. While women increasingly acquire professional training and play professional roles, "the salience of women's commitment to family roles—so often emphasized in the Indian culture as being central to their very being— remains undiminished" (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001, p. 561). Indian women on the way to leadership positions are faced with a strong double bind: "As professional women they are expected to be committed to their work 'just like men' at the same time as they are normatively required to give priority to their family" (Malhotra & Sachdeva, 2005, p. 41). Gender stereotypes may require prioritizing family over work, regardless of women's career aspirations or choices.

*Singapore.* Even though traditional gender stereotypes most likely do not impede women's advancement to leadership positions in Singapore as much as in other Asian cultures, the economy's dynamism puts pressure on employees (Thein, Austen, Currie, & Lewin, 2010). As a result, work has gained priority over family in recent years, which poses unique challenges for

women leaders in Singapore as the ability to combine work and family duties has been reported

as particularly burdensome for women (Linehan & Walsh, 2000).

In short, research on leadership and particularly on women leaders has been dominated

by approaches from the U.S.. Specifically, while the effectiveness of leadership behaviors and

expectations towards leaders have been analyzed comparing Asian and Western cultures (House,

et al., 2004) while taking different levels of leadership into account (e.g., CEOs; House, et al.,

2014), intercultural comparisons of factors influencing leader emergence of women are missing.

Concordantly, we seek to address the following research questions:

*R.1: What are crucial success factors for women's advancement to leadership positions in*

*China, India, and Singapore? Are they the same as or different from the success factors in the*

*U.S.? Are there differences between the Asian countries with regard to these factors?*

*R.2: How do gender stereotypes impact women's advancement to leadership positions? Do they*

*constitute particularly impactful barriers in Asia or are the inter-country differences within Asia*

*substantially larger than the differences between Asia and the U.S.?*

**Leadership Styles**

**Western approaches.** Among the most influential approaches to conceptualize

leadership are democratic versus autocratic style (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938), and task-oriented style

versus interpersonally-oriented style (Bales, 1950). In their meta-analysis comparing women and

men, Eagly and Johnson (1990) found that women engaged in more interpersonally-oriented and

democratic styles, while men displayed more task-oriented and autocratic leadership styles.

However, these findings only held for laboratory studies with non-leader samples. Field studies

demonstrated that women adopted a more democratic and less autocratic style than men, but

there were no differences in task- versus interpersonally-oriented leadership. The distinction

between task- versus interpersonally-oriented leadership behavior was developed further and is incorporated in the concepts of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In their meta-analysis comparing women and men, Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003) found that women engaged more in transformational as well as the active component of transactional leadership, while men engaged more in a passive type of transactional leadership as well as in laissez-faire leadership.

Most recent conceptualizations of leadership stress leaders' values and include ethical leadership (e.g., Brown & Treviño, 2006), authentic leadership (e.g., Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012b), and servant leadership (e.g., Pircher Verdorfer & Peus, 2014). However, although differences between men and women with regard to these values-oriented types of leadership have been posited (e.g., Eagly, 2005), large-scale empirical comparisons are lacking.

Although the dominance of Western, particularly North American, approaches to leadership has decreased somewhat in recent years, there is still a "need for a better understanding of the way in which leadership is enacted in various cultures" (Palrecha, et al., 2012, p. 148), particularly Asian ones.

**Asian approaches.** While Western culture fosters a focus on leadership as individual assertion, Asian cultures appear to imply leadership as group-focused action (Menon, Sim, Fu, Chiu, & Hong, 2010). However, differences in views on effective leadership between Asian cultures have been obtained (Taormina & Selvarajah, 2005). Among the most prominent locally grounded approaches are paternalistic leadership (see Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008), posited to be particularly relevant in China, and the nurturant-task leader model (Sinha, 1995) from India.

*China.* Paternalistic leadership combines strong authority with benevolence, i.e. support, guidance and care for subordinates (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). Since paternalism is closely related to Confucian ideology, subordinates in China place a high value on paternalistic leadership, and it is very prevalent in corporate contexts (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004). The question to what extent paternalistic leadership generalizes to female leaders is yet to be answered (Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2014) and is deemed particularly interesting as "women may (…) be more effective at demonstrating benevolent behaviors, while men may be more effective at demonstrating authoritarian behaviors" (Chen, et al., 2014, p. 814).

*India.* Nurturant leadership is characterized by leaders' care for their subordinates' wellbeing and individual growth. Palrecha, et al. (2012) compared this leadership style with transformational leadership and the company's local leadership model in an Indian corporate context and found that the company's local leadership model was the best predictor of subordinates' job performance, followed by nurturant-task leadership; transformational leadership did not explain variance in the performance outcome over and above the other two leadership approaches. Adaptations of transformational leadership measures to India revealed a six-factor model with unique cultural dimensions such as personal touch (e.g., Singh & Krishnan, 2007). Furthermore, paternalistic leadership showed positive relations with job satisfaction, leader-member-exchange, and organizational commitment in India (Pellegrini, Scandura, & Jayaraman, 2010). In short, benevolent and protective leader behaviors are particularly likely to emerge in India (Sinha, 1990); however, more thorough investigations on how *women* in India lead are needed.

*Singapore.* Compared to China and India, the Singaporean leadership context appears relatively understudied. Interestingly, excellent leadership was described least in terms of

consideration for others in a sample of Singaporean managers as compared to other Southeast-Asian countries (i.e., Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand; Taormina & Selvarajah, 2005). However, transformational leadership was positively related to leader-member-exchange and innovativeness in R&D departments (Lee, 2008). Moreover, positive relations were obtained between ethical leadership, transformational leadership, and contingent reward leadership on the one hand and leader effectiveness, follower extra effort, and satisfaction with the leader on the other hand (Toor & Ofori, 2009). Systematic investigations of *women's* leadership in Singapore are lacking. In fact, in recent investigations of leadership in Singapore, gender was not considered (Toor & Ofori, 2009).

To summarize, research on how women leaders enact leadership in Asia and how their leadership styles compare to the ones enacted by their Western counterparts is largely lacking (with notable exceptions, e.g., van Emmerik, Euwema, & Wendt, 2008; van Emmerik, Wendt, & Euwema, 2010). Similarly, analyses of culturally dependent interpretations of Western-dominated leadership dimensions in Asian contexts are largely missing (House et al., 2014).

Concordantly, in building a frame of reference for the analysis of women's leadership styles in Asia and the U.S., we conceptualize our findings not based on single leadership constructs—Western-developed ones such as transformational, transactional (Bass & Avolio, 1994), or ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), nor Asian-developed ones such as paternalistic leadership (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008) and nurturant-task leadership (Palrecha, et al., 2012; Sinha, 1984)—but rather to integrate them. Following DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, and Humphrey (2011) we distinguish between *relational-oriented* and *task-oriented* leader behaviors, with relational-oriented behaviors encompassing consideration, empowerment, participative, or nurturing leadership and task-oriented behaviors comprising initiating structure,

directive, or task leadership. Finally, in line with recent values-oriented types of leadership (e.g., Peus, et al., 2012b; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) as well as the morality aspect of paternalistic leadership (Chen, et al., 2014), we include *values-orientation*. Hence, we propose the following research questions:

*R.3: To what extent are women's leadership styles in Asia and America characterized by values-orientation, task-orientation, and relational-orientation?*

*R.4: Does women's leadership style differ more between the U.S. and Asia than between the different Asian countries?*

## Method

Since quantitative methods would be insufficient to capture the particular meanings of success factors and barriers to advancement to a leadership position as well as of leadership styles in different cultures (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Bryman, 2004, 2008; Parry, Mumford, Bower, & Watts, 2014; Pratt, 2009), we chose a qualitative approach and conducted personal interviews with female managers from the U.S. and Asia. This allowed us to examine how women advance to leadership positions and how they enact leadership in their specific cultural context.

### Sample

Respondents were contacted via women's business organizations in the respective countries (e.g., The Boston Club, Singapore Council of Women's Organizations, The Women's Register) as well as professional contacts of the research team followed by snowball sampling. 76 female managers participated in this study (25 American, 17 Chinese, 15 Indian, 19 Singaporean). All of them had a mid-level to upper-level managerial position with leadership responsibility (e.g., Vice President, Senior Vice President, or Section Manager) in an

organization with more than 500 employees and a minimum of six years of leadership experience.

The final sample covered a wide range of industry sectors including financial services, telecommunications, energy, healthcare, and manufacturing, and the participants had diverse backgrounds and occupations with 21.54 years ($SD = 6.59$) of professional experience on average. Further demographic information is presented in Table 1.

*Table 1 approximately here*

**Data Collection**

The interviews were conducted in person in their respective countries and in one of the official languages (i.e., English, Chinese, or Hindi). To ensure highest data quality, interviewers held a degree in social sciences, received extensive training in research methods, and had substantial interview experience at their disposal. All interviewers conducted practice interviews and received feedback in order to ensure that they followed the interview guideline in the same way.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guideline that covered questions concerning success factors as well as barriers for achieving their leadership positions. Further questions focused on their own leadership behaviors. Themes that emerged during the interview were elaborated further in order to follow relevant lines of inquiry (Linehan & Walsh, 2000). At the end of the interview, every participant gave demographic and job-related information. Overall, interviews lasted from 35 to 60 minutes, were taped recorded and

transcribed. Transcripts in Chinese and Hindi were translated to English for data analysis by a native speaker and cross-validated by a second native speaker.

**Data Analysis**

To identify success factors and barriers for women's advancement to leadership positions in the U.S. and Asia as well as to investigate women's leadership styles, we used inductive analysis techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This allowed us to understand individual career paths from the perspective of the female managers interviewed rather than explaining it 'from the outside' (Ospina, 2004). Our approach is in line with Bryman (2004, p. 763) who argued that only qualitative research allows researchers to gather a "profound sense of the realities of leadership".

The inductive analysis of the interview data followed a multiple-step sequence ranging from descriptive summaries to the development of higher-order categories that required comparative analysis, synthesis, and interpretation across the interviews and across countries (see also Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Faris & Parry, 2011; Kramer & Crespy, 2011; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Palrecha, et al., 2012, for examples of this procedure):

In the first steps of analysis, every researcher focused on one of the four countries for an in-depth examination of the specifics of this particular cultural context. Therefore, the researcher compiled interview-specific descriptive summaries of five interviews per country in order to document emerging major themes and tentative, preliminary concepts for each interview (Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Second, individual researchers compared major themes from different interviews to identify similarities and differences across all interviews of one specific country. Themes that

appeared to be closely associated and thus to belong to the same higher-level concept were grouped together to develop country-specific concepts.

Third, the researchers reduced the set of country-specific concepts to develop higher-order categories by comparing and contrasting concepts across all countries in several rounds of individual work and joint discussion (King, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This step of analysis resulted in a final list of categories that describe the success factors and barriers participants had encountered during their career development, as well as interviewees' own leadership behaviors. Table 2 and 3 summarize the coding categories and definitions.

*Table 2 approximately here*

*Table 3 approximately here*

Based on the set of coding categories developed during the above described procedure, the research team undertook further investigations of the material by (re-)analyzing the interview transcripts. We chose to (re-)analyze 15 interviews per country to counterbalance different sample sizes and to allow for more simplified comparison across countries. The frequencies of each category were determined for each country as well as across countries and are depicted in Tables 4 and 5 respectively.

To ensure rigor of data analysis, four experienced researchers in the field of organizational behavior were involved in data analysis. It is considered as a major benefit of this study that the research team did not reside in any of the countries analyzed (Bryman, 2004; Lowe & Gardner, 2000). However, the researchers involved had several years of cross-cultural experience as well as cross-cultural research experience at their disposal.

To counteract threats to rigor of the analytical process and reliability of results, the final list of codes and definitions was discussed with cultural experts from the U.S., China, Singapore, and India in order to examine their validity while considering the particular cultural context (see LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

## Results

Based on earlier work on women's advancement to leadership positions (e.g., Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989), we distinguish between factors at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and social systems level in presenting success factors and barriers that emerged from the inductive analysis of the interviews. To achieve a more grounded understanding of the relevant categories and their meaning in a particular culture, we provide a summary of the most important factors and illustrate these by means of verbatim citations. We also provide coding frequencies (see Table 4 for success factors and barriers and Table 5 for leadership style).

*Table 4 approximately here*

*Table 5 approximately here*

### Success Factors

The success factors that emerged were at the individual level and the interpersonal level. The most important factors (achievement orientation and learning orientation) were attached similar importance across all countries, while only one culture-specific factor (risk-taking) emerged. Role models were of equal significance for all women managers; however, the reference group largely differed across countries, which also illustrates the necessity to consider cultural meanings of categories in leadership research.

**Achievement orientation.** Virtually all women managers in the U.S. and in China and the majority of managers in Singapore and India stressed their willingness to work hard and their dedication to achieve superior levels of performance as a crucial success factor for advancement. The terms they used to describe their attitude (e.g., "working hard", "diligence" or seeking to "achieve excellence") were largely consistent across countries.

*We believe in the saying 'no pain no gains'. (...) I devoted myself to the work.* (Chinese manager)

This finding is concordant with earlier research, which demonstrated achievement orientation as one of the major predictors of managerial advancement (e.g., Marongiu & Ekehammar, 1999).

**Learning orientation.** Women managers in the U.S. as well as in Singapore, China, and India stressed to the same extent that they had sought to expand their knowledge and skills. Across countries, they reported having drawn on different sources to facilitate their learning such as reading books, observing peers, and learning from others.

*I am intensely curious and I find whenever I'm trying to do something new, I'm reading books about it. So, I think I gather information. If I'm just reading, or if I'm talking to other people, I use that to come to a conclusion.* (U.S. manager)

**Risk taking.** Unlike in Asia women in the U.S. described having taken risks in their careers as a crucial success factor. This is in line with high levels of individualism in the U.S. culture (Hofstede, 1980; House, et al., 2004) as well as a self-employed career paradigm, which considers career as a series of projects in which finding one's own way to move up is crucial (Bridges, 1994).

*I think taking risks out of my comfort zone and kind of saying, almost pushing myself like off a cliff. It's like, I don't think I can do this, but okay I'm going to give it a try.* (U.S. manager)

**Role models.** Role models emerged as a crucial factor at the interpersonal level. In the U.S., managers mostly referred to role models from their professional life. They expressed that

the most influential group of people for their careers had been higher-level managers (both their direct managers and skip-level managers). The majority of U.S. managers reported that they had learned from *female* role models by observing their actions, talking to them, and receiving direct advice. Singaporean managers predominantly mentioned the impact of *male* role models. This corresponds to the fact that only since the 1990ies the participation of women in tertiary education has increased in Singapore, and thus the percentage of women in professional roles has been rising only from that time on (Aryee, 1992). In China and India, the role models were mostly from the private realm. In fact, every second Chinese manager emphasized his or her mother's significance as a role model.

*My mother was a professional woman. (…) She gave me such great impact and taught me to be an independent woman.* (Chinese manager)

*Yes, so role model in that sense I have lived up to my mother. I have lived up to the way she balanced work and family.* (Indian manager)

As the above quotes illustrate, in China, mothers had become important role models because they had challenged the fact that a woman's priority should lie on being a wife and mother. In India, to the contrary, mothers had become role models for the managers because they had in fact exemplified how women can combine being a wife and mother with having a career.

**Barriers**

The most important barriers to women's advancement across countries occurred at the social systems level. Virtually all of the barriers that were regarded as substantial by women managers were consequences of gender stereotypes.

**Negative performance expectations and double bind.** While the implications of gender stereotypes were mentioned as barriers to women's advancement across all four countries, negative performance expectations and the resulting need to prove one's competence as well as

the double bind of being assertive but at the same time communal (Heilman, 2012) were

mentioned somewhat more frequently by women in the U.S. than in the Asian countries.

*It was absolutely clear to me that you had to be a good deal better than not just the average but all men to be on an equal footing.* (U.S. manager)

*There's a very narrow, narrow path that women can walk to be acceptable whereas there's a very wide one for men.* (U.S. manager)

**Caregiver roles and responsibilities.** The most salient barrier overall pertained to

caregiver roles and responsibilities. However, attitudes and strategies to overcome this barrier

varied substantially between countries. In the U.S. the default for women managers was to

pursue their career but to have children, too. Although this required making sacrifices in one's

career, none of the U.S. managers reported having made the deliberate choice not to have

children, as has been reported earlier for other countries such as Germany (Peus & Traut-

Mattausch, 2008). All in all managers from the U. S. described that they were able to combine

their caregiver roles with a leadership position–largely because of paid help, support from their

husbands, friends, or employers, and by having made job-related decisions such as switching

organizations or going sideways in their careers for some time. Only one third of the Chinese

managers explicitly mentioned conflicts between caregiver and managerial roles; the majority

put a strong emphasis on their career. This is in line with results from a study by Yang, Chen,

Choi, and Zou (2000) who found that due to the collectivistic orientation in China sacrificing

family time for professional purposes was seen as self-sacrifice for the benefit of the family.

*I do not think much about the negative impact on my family life. I think it is completely right to devote yourself to your work because you get something in return, such as respect from the others.* (Chinese manager)

In contrast, the default expressed by Indian managers was to get married (in part also

arranged marriages) and to have children. There was no decision to be made about assuming

caregiver roles or not. Rather than an obstacle to one's career, family was seen as a source of support and a fall back position when things at work go wrong.

*So anyway I have not disconnected myself from my social life, which is very necessary because that gives you standing and confidence. And of course you need someone to fall back on, you need a family, at least somebody since everyone does not have a family.* (Indian manager)

In Singapore, more than half of the managers emphasized their duties as caregivers at home. Those women with children said that without the support of their family and domestic helpers they could not have kept on working. Regret or guilt that they could not spend as much time with their children and their family was often voiced.

*It was very difficult for me to go on with my career because there was this constant guilt, if you don't have a good domestic help.* (Singaporean manager)

In sum, our findings about success factors and barriers revealed commonalities but also differences across countries. For several factors the differences between Asian countries are even more pronounced than the differences between Asia and the U.S. Furthermore, our results highlight the significance of a qualitative approach as we found cross-cultural differences concerning the meaning of the coding categories but not the coding frequencies.

**Leadership Styles**

**Values-oriented leadership.** The majority of U.S. managers stressed the importance of self-awareness and leading by one's own values (authentic leadership, Walumbwa, et al., 2008).

*Sense of who you are, to be centered, and what your values are.  And what you want to be and what you're about.* (U.S. manager)

Even though mentioned less frequently, the way women in Singapore talked about their values resembled the way women in the U.S. talked about their values and how these had informed their leadership.

*In business you cannot have a halfway house. You have to be committed. You must have your own integrity, your credibility, your value system and principles.* (Singaporean manager)

Analyses of leader's values in these two countries revealed that integrity, honesty, and sincerity emerged as crucial values.

*I really hold firm on (...) having a high level of honesty and integrity, especially with the people I manage* (American manager)

*To be able to act with integrity is the key to success of this role (...). Don't do to others what you don't want others to do to you.* (Singaporean manager)

**Task-oriented leadership.** Chinese managers mentioned task-oriented leadership most frequently. They highlighted that leading people was about instructing them and teaching them how to accomplish a specific task.

*In my opinion, manager is like that: You lead people to do the tasks.* (Chinese manager)

Furthermore, they highlighted that an important type of leadership also constitutes in being able to put the right person in the right position. While one third of women managers in India also alluded to task-oriented leadership, it remained largely unmentioned in Singapore and the U.S..

**Relational-oriented leadership.** Relational-oriented leadership emerged as the most common leadership style, mentioned by nearly two thirds of the interviewees. Yet, there were cross-cultural differences: Relational-oriented leadership was emphasized more by Indian and Singaporean than by U.S. and Chinese managers. In fact, the leadership behaviors that Indian managers described were strongly focused on others with the aim of empowering them to become good leaders. This is in line with the nurturing aspects of leadership (e.g., Palrecha, et al., 2012).

*The best leader is the one who creates more leaders. (... ) I have already started delegations, creating leaders, or instead of saying leaders, at this stage even if they become good managers, their next step will be a good leader.* (Indian manager)

In concordance with notions of paternalistic leadership (e.g., Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008), Singaporean managers sought to facilitate their employees' development not only in their professional but also their lives in general.

*We provide an in-house learning program, sensitivity to life stages of employees hoping to coach our senior managers and then we see our employees as people going through life.* (Singaporean manager)

In short, analyses of women managers' approaches to leadership revealed commonalities as well as differences within Asia and commonalities between the U.S. and specific Asian countries. Thus, it is not adequate to simply distinguish between "Asian" and "Western" types of leadership.

## Discussion

This study constitutes one of the few to have examined leadership both cross-culturally, hereby incorporating empirical evidence from several Asian countries as well as the U.S. and focusing on female leaders. It thus meets two claims pertaining to desired avenues of leadership research (Gardner, et al., 2010).

Applying a qualitative approach enabled us to gain "a profound sense of the realities of leadership (…) presented in leaders' own words" (Bryman, 2004, p. 763) and to develop a thorough understanding of the way women–still a minority in leadership positions–emerge as leaders in the U.S., China, India, and Singapore as well as how their leadership styles can be characterized. Hence this study warrants conclusions on how cultural norms shape patterns of leader emergence as well as acceptable and effective leadership behaviors and whether there are differences between the U.S. and Asia (or between Asian countries) in this regard. It extends previous research in several ways: First, our research goes beyond earlier findings that indicate cultural differences in leadership expectations and effective leadership behaviors, yet, have not

focused on differences from a specific gender perspective (House, et al., 2014). Second, we go beyond earlier studies of singular influences on women's career development (e.g., international assignment decisions; Stroh, et al., 2000) to provide an integrative framework of facilitators and barriers at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, and social systems level. Third, we build upon and expand findings that national culture shapes gender role attitudes in organizations (Parboteeah, et al., 2008) to predict similarities and differences of women's career development and leadership styles between Asian countries and the U.S.. The findings are particularly impactful since attitudes towards women have been found to shape individual perceptions of the organization (e.g., perceived employee-company fit; Newburry, Belkin, & Ansari, 2007).

**Overview of Findings**

**Success factors and barriers.** With regard to the question of *how women become leaders,* our study revealed no clear differences between Asia and the U.S.. Women leaders across continents stressed the importance of success factors at the individual level (achievement and learning orientation) and at the interpersonal level (role models) as well as barriers at the social systems level (gender stereotypes). However, a closer analysis of the meaning of these categories revealed differences, for example with regard to who the most important role models had been and how they had influenced women's career advancement. It is interesting to note that overall, the differences within Asia (particularly between China and India) were larger than differences between Asia and the U.S..

**Leadership styles.** Regarding the question how women's leadership styles can be characterized, we successfully applied a categorization based on DeRue, et al. (2011) and Peus, Kerschreiter, Frey, & Traut-Mattausch (2010), namely relational-oriented, task-oriented, and values-oriented leadership. Our findings suggest that there is no clear distinction between

"Asian" and "Western" leadership, but that we rather need to consider the very specifics of

leadership among different countries. While our findings showed similarities on some

dimensions (e.g., high levels of values-oriented leadership in the U.S. and Singapore), they

differed in other regards (e.g., a high level of task-oriented leadership in China, which was

neither present in the U.S. nor in India or Singapore). We were able to show that a seemingly

equivalent emphasis on certain leadership dimensions (e.g., contributing to employee

development) may have diverging meanings depending on the culture. For example, in China

leaders stressed that employees need to be developed to enable them to better achieve company

goals, while the focus of employee development was on helping employees to become leaders in

India and on supporting employees' private lives in Singapore. In order to provide a more

nuanced description of leadership in each country, brief summaries are presented below.

**Women leaders in the U.S.** In the U.S., leadership was characterized by high levels of

individualism (Hofstede, 2001) as well as the dominance of a self-employed career paradigm

(Bridges, 1994) before. Women leaders highlighted that they had followed their individual vision

of becoming a leader and pursued it by taking risks, learning continuously, and seeking out the

organizations that would best meet their goals (which for many included combining their career

with caregiver roles). The importance of an individualistic orientation was also evident in the

way women managers described their leadership, that is, being guided largely by their own

values.

**Women leaders in China.** The necessity to comply with organizational and/or societal

values played a crucial role in China. Individual level factors such as achievement and learning

orientation were regarded as necessary in order to establish positive relations with others,

especially superiors. Similarly, Chinese managers described their leadership styles as facilitating

their followers' development in order to help them achieve their tasks and meet organizational

goals. This finding appears somewhat surprising as earlier research suggested the dominance of a

paternalistic leadership style in China (Cheng, et al., 2004), which in part has been described in

terms of benevolence (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Paşa, Kabasakal, & Bodur, 2001). The

dominance of task-oriented leadership as well as the fact that many of the Chinese women

interviewed stressed the importance of their careers might be explained by an overall transition

in China to an industrialized economy (Leung, 2002), stronger market-orientation (Blayney,

2001), and an increasing focus on capitalist attributes (Wang, et al., 2005).

  **Women leaders in India.** In India the managers expressed that gender stereotypes still

emphasized women's roles as wife and mother (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001; Malhotra &

Sachdeva, 2005), wherefore many of them put their career second to their family. At the same

time they depicted their families not as a burden but rather as a source of support and a realm one

can turn to when things at work are not going well. The importance of nurturant values also

emerged in the way female managers in India described their leadership. Specifically, they

reported aspiring to develop their subordinates in a way that they would become leaders

themselves, thus facilitating their overall development. This emphasis on employees' personal

development concurs with descriptions of nurturant-task leadership (Sinha, 1984), which has

been demonstrated to be particularly effective in India (Palrecha, et al., 2012).

  **Women leaders in Singapore.** Results from Singapore revealed yet another type of

leadership in Asia: With regard to advancing to leadership positions Singaporean female

managers stressed both the importance of their (male) managers (as in the U.S. or China) but also

of role models from their private lives (as in India or China). Furthermore, they expressed more

frequently than their Chinese but less than their Indian counterparts that combining their career

with their caregiver role had been challenging. The type of leadership enacted in Singapore was relatively similar to that in the U.S. with a high emphasis on self-awareness and value-orientation–and relatively dissimilar to the type of leadership in China. Interestingly, while the result that Singaporean managers emphasized a strong values-orientation concurs with earlier findings (e.g., Toor & Ofori, 2009), we did not find that Singaporean managers displayed consideration and trust in subordinates less than managers from other Asian countries (cf. Taormina & Selvarajah, 2005). Finally, almost all of the Singaporean leaders attached high importance to developing and supporting their employees, which is in concordance with notions of paternalistic leadership (e.g., Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008).

**Limitations**

Despite providing many relevant insights into women's advancement to and enactment of leadership in Asian countries and the U.S., this study is not free of limitations. First, due to the qualitative approach the country-specific samples are relatively small. Moreover, influences related to different levels of management, branch of business, or managers' age and career stage might have impacted our results. Especially the Indian sample was very heterogeneous in these terms. Second, the rich data gathered from 76 interviews with women managers compelled us to focus on aspects that emerged as most relevant. For the benefit of clarity, other aspects had to be discounted. Third, the results of this research are based on self-report solely. Thereby, we captured the perspective of the managers themselves; however, it is viable to assume that other groups in organizations (e.g., men, subordinates) will express differing perspectives on the ascent and leadership of women managers in the U.S. and Asia.

**Future Research**

Future research is necessary to validate our findings. In a next step quantitative and

longitudinal analyses seem fruitful as they enable an analysis of developments concerning the

social structures of Asian countries (Sun & Wang, 2009) as well as potential changes in gender

stereotypes (Duehr & Bono, 2006) and their impact on leadership. Further, in correspondence

with an increasing shift from leaders' perspectives to an integration of leader and follower

perspectives in organizations (e.g., Peus, Braun, & Frey, 2012a), future studies should

incorporate subordinates' perceptions of women managers in their cultural contexts.

**Practical Implications**

Despite the above stated limitations, our research makes substantial contributions to

cross-cultural perspectives on women's advancement to leadership positions and their leadership

behavior. First, practitioners, who are in charge of evaluating and selecting managers in

organizations, should be aware that gender stereotypes still negatively influence evaluations of

women and attitudes towards women in leadership positions (Heilman, 2012). Therefore

leadership assessments "must be conducted in a structured manner, primarily based on

behavioral criteria" (Peus, et al., 2012a, p. 106). Second, our findings emphasize that access to

roles models is necessary to encourage and guide women across countries. Hence, the

implementation of professional mentoring systems is likely to be useful. Third, much more

emphasis must be put on family-friendly policies through corporate and political regulations that

enable women to pursue managerial careers and fulfill their caregiver roles at the same time

(Peus & Traut-Mattausch, 2008).

In short, due to the global shift in economic power towards Asia on the one hand and the

increase in female leaders on the other hand, a deeper understanding of the way women reach

leadership positions in Asia and the way they enact leadership is necessary. We hope that this

article represents an important first step into this direction and inspires future research.

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Table 1:

*Sample Description*

|  | U.S. | China | India | Singapore |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sample size | $n = 25$ | $n = 17$ | $n = 15$ | $n = 19$ |
| Age (years) | $M = 47.60$, $SD = 7.71$ | $M = 35.94$, $SD = 5.98$ | $M = 44.33$, $SD = 7.06$ | $M = 49.24$, $SD = 8.60$ |
| Education[a] | 52% Masters/ MBA | 44% Masters/ MBA | 80% Masters/ MBA | 37% Masters/ MBA |

*Note.* [a] The highest academic degree gained.

Table 2:

*Coding Categories Across Countries: Success Factors and Barriers*

| Code | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| *Coding categories for success factors* | |
| Achievement orientation | Clear statement of a desire to excel. Emphasis on performance criteria. Standard of excellence. |
| Learning orientation | Willingness and inclination to learn continuously throughout one's career. Disposition to proactively approach and achieve learning. |
| Risk taking | Willingness to take risks to move forward in one's career. |
| Role models | Emphasis on the importance of role models to guide individual development. Attribution of career success to the influence of significant persons from private or professional life. |
| *Coding categories for barriers* | |
| Negative performance expectations | Perception of higher performance standards due to prejudice and stereotypes. Experience of lower ascribed competency. |
| Double bind woman-manager | Perception of a personal dilemma between professionalism and femininity. Perception of competing expectations with regard to communication and leadership behaviors. |
| Caregiver roles and responsibilities | High pressure to fulfill a caregiving role in private life. Experience of a work-family conflict. |

Table 3:

*Coding Categories Across Countries: Leadership Style*

| Code | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| Values-oriented leadership | Emphasis on leader's values and core beliefs that guide behavior. Integrity and honesty. Importance of authentic and ethical behavior. |
| Task-oriented leadership | Focus on the tasks that need to be performed. Clear definition of deadlines, procedures, and roles. |
| Relational-oriented leadership | Focus on supporting and developing team members professionally and/or personally. Consideration and recognition of followers' needs. Providing a trustful and positive work environment. |

Table 4:

*Coding Frequencies Across Countries: Success Factors and Barriers*

| Code | U.S. | China | India | Singapore | *Overall* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Coding frequencies for success factors* | | | | | |
| Achievement orientation | 14 | 12 | 8 | 10 | *44* |
| Learning orientation | 11 | 11 | 10 | 12 | *44* |
| Risk taking | 8 | 2 | 1 | 1 | *12* |
| Role models | 13 | 12 | 15 | 13 | *53* |
| *Coding frequencies for barriers* | | | | | |
| Negative performance expectations | 9 | 7 | 4 | 4 | *24* |
| Double bind woman-manager | 8 | 5 | 4 | 3 | *20* |
| Caregiver roles and responsibilities | 8 (2) | 5 (8) | 6 (8) | 8 (0) | *30 (18)* |

*Note: n* = 15 for each country. Overall *N* = 60. Table displays absolute numbers. Numbers in parentheses refer to explicit statements that this aspect was perceived as *not* relevant for one's own career.

Table 5:

*Coding Frequencies Across Countries: Leadership Style*

| Code | U.S. | China | India | Singapore | *Overall* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Values-oriented leadership | 10 | 6 | 5 | 5 | *26* |
| Task-oriented leadership | 2 | 7 | 5 | 3 | *17* |
| Relational-oriented leadership | 9 | 8 | 14 | 13 | *44* |

*Note:* $n = 15$ for each country. Overall $N = 60$. Table displays absolute numbers.