Global Leader or Cultural Outsider? The Divergent Effects of International Experiences on Leadership Effectiveness vs. Leadership Selection

As globalization continues, international experiences are increasingly valued by individuals and organizations. It is commonly assumed that international experiences are conducive to leadership, yet little empirical research has tested this assumption. This omission is critical because (i) international experiences are costly, and (ii) the majority of repatriates report that international experiences had a neutral or negative impact on their leadership careers.

To resolve this apparent puzzle and understand the effects of international experiences on leadership, this research theoretically distinguishes between leadership effectiveness and leadership selection. I theorize that international experiences can increase an individual’s leadership effectiveness (the “global leader” effect), but may decrease his/her likelihood of being selected as a leader by his/her national in-group members (the “cultural outsider” effect). That is, the same international experiences that make an individual a “global leader” may also ironically render him/her a “cultural outsider”.

To examine the global leader effect, I first conducted a field survey in an Australian firm (Study 1). Results revealed that individuals with broader international experiences were rated as more effective leaders because of their greater communication competence. I then collected a 25-year archival panel of soccer managers of the English Premier League (Study 2). This study not only replicated the global leader effect with an objective measure of leadership effectiveness (i.e., team performance), but also used instrumental variable analysis to provide quasi-experimental causal evidence. To examine the cultural outsider effect, I conducted a leader selection survey on a cohort of entering MBA students (Study 3) and a lab experiment (Study 4). Results revealed that the longer a person had lived abroad, the less likely he/she was selected as a leader by his/her national in-group members because they perceived him/her as less similar to themselves.

By simultaneously revealing an upside of international experiences for leadership effectiveness but a downside for leadership selection, this research offers important theoretical contributions and practical implications for leadership, culture, diversity, teams, human resources, and international management in a globalized world.