Superior-Subordinate Relationships and Satisfaction in Indian Small Business Enterprises

Mainuddin Afza

This paper has used the hierarchy-based power system by French and Raven (1959) for researching the motivational potential in small business manufacturing enterprises. Studies in this area have been conducted but most of them are in the US, a country that is characterized by favourable demographic and other infrastructural environmental factors. However, this study used data from small business enterprises in India which is a fast developing economy though it does not yet have the logistics and the techno-economic infrastructure like the one in the US.

One primary objective of this study was to see if the findings from an emerging economy are different from those of developed countries. Another objective was to get insights into the hierarchical motivation dynamics in the Indian enterprises. Indian environment is different from the US’ in two important respects: the existence of high power-distance in the organizational hierarchies (as opposed to low power-distance in the US), and the market life cycle driven maturity level of Michel Porter’s (1985) industry forces. The ultimate objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between bases of leader power and several criterion variables such as commitment, satisfaction, intent to leave, and compliance.

Some of the findings of the study are as follows:

- The power bases are influential predictors in the US, a society that is characterized by high level of individualistic materialism, low power-distance, and strong entrepreneurial mental behaviour.
- In India, the power bases are likely to be even more influential because of the society’s unique socio-cultural characteristics.
- India’s social environment is high on power-distance that commands loyalty and possibly accountability in small business sector.
- The influence of Confucian philosophy and Gandhi’s values are likely factors that differentiate India’s culture base from that of the US.

The results of this study are quite consistent with many of the findings of more recent studies done in the US. There were some differences between the findings of the present and other recent studies which may be attributed to the type of professionals who participated in this study and the socio-economic and power-distance driven cultural differences between the US and India. One important limitation of the present study is that the relationships discussed are correlational, not causal. Experimental studies are needed to investigate causal links between the bases of leader power and criterion variables. Moreover, further studies of superior-subordinate relationships and their effects on motivation and compliance using India’s culture factors are needed to determine the relevance and applicability of US-based studies in India.

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The superior-subordinate relationship has been a long time focus of discussion and investigation. In this age of intense inter-company rivalry, dynamics of such relationship can make or break an organization. Intense competition is also on the rise in fast emerging industrialized countries such as India (Raman, 2000). How to manage the superior-subordinate relationship to serve an organization’s best long-term interest is an open question. However, all agree that somehow the relationship has to be managed to provide superior performance and continued productivity.

This study investigates the impact of different power bases on subordinates’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, attitudinal and behavioural compliances, and the propensity to leave jobs. Previous studies have limitations on measurement and analysis. Moreover, findings of these studies cannot be generalized for small business conditions. This study utilizes a modified instrument that fits into the small business situation and has been used to measure French and Raven’s (1959) supervisory power bases. It is based on the responses from approximately 350 employees in the production, marketing, and office administration departments of 25 manufacturing companies from the Durgapur industrial belt in the state of West Bengal in India. The number of employees in each of these companies ranges from 150 to 350.

Power is the core of the superior-subordinate relationship. Several classifications of the supervisory power have been presented by researchers over a period of time. However, the bases of power taxonomy by French and Raven (1959)—coercive, reward, legitimate, expert and referent—still appear to be fairly representative as well as well accepted by scholars (Cobb, 1980; Shukla, 1982). In an organizational setting, a superior applies power to get things done by the subordinates. How is power used at the workplace? How should power be used? The answers may seem immaterial as long as the mission is accomplished. However, in the small business environment, the use of power may be more central to success. In both large and small organizations, it is often found that the subordinates’ commitment to their jobs is weak, job satisfaction is low, turnover rates are high, and the subordinates’ attitudes and behaviours are not positively reflecting the organization’s expectations, values, and cultures. These consequences happen when superiors do not or rather poorly understand the dynamics of the contextual basis of power they use to build and manage their relationships with the fellow subordinates. Consequently, in the environment of intense inter-company competition and quickest response time (QRT) imperative, organizations which fail to unbind the dynamics of power also fail to sustain productivity momentum. Small business enterprises enjoy greater advantage of being flexible and capable of responding quickly to market changes but, historically, small businesses are also known for not underestimating or ignoring their human capital as an important source of productivity. Small businesses which are typically short of cash and other resources are also notoriously obsessed with their bottom line.

SMALL BUSINESS IN INDIA

India is an emerging industrialized nation and has been experiencing fast growth in its small business sector over the past decade. Several empirical studies have been conducted involving power and its effectiveness using data mostly from the large and small business sectors of the US. Lately, a few similar studies have also been made comparing the US experience with that of other countries such as Canada and some East European countries (Lussier and Hornsby, 2000; Walton, 1988). In India, at least one study (Kumar, 2001) was carried out which examined the growth of small business entrepreneurship and the underlying factors for such rapid growth and success. Kumar’s work did use some internal factors (e.g., authority and reward) as the criteria that are attributed to success, but it did not try to examine the role of power base. It is also unclear as to whether these findings can be generalized for the situations in the South Asian countries that differ from the US and the other Western countries in Europe and North America in terms of economic complexities, infrastructure, demographic variables, and socio-cultural conditions. Hofstede’s (1980) model of national culture has clearly identified the South Asian countries and the major Western countries at the opposite ends of the same continuum on cultural variables such as power-distance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. Moreover, Hofstede and Bond (1988) also asserted that such differences have implications for productivity and success which may be different in countries with different cultural characteristics.

India’s democratic political system has provided the country with a stable and consistent economic environment. However, since the country became inde-
ependent in 1947, its political leadership never experimented with market-based economic system to foster a rapid economic and technological growth. It is only after the demise of Communist system worldwide that India’s political leadership in 1993 changed its policy and embraced a more market-based economic system and open trade policies with other countries of the world. The effect of the policy over the last ten years has been enormous. The newly emerging small business industries have already become a major contributor to the country’s gross domestic product and the most important source of employment for the Indian professionals and workers (Annual Economic Bulletin, 2001). Also, the intensity of inter-company rivalry in the small business enterprises has risen to a level where variables such as quality decisions, quick decisions, and their efficient implementation appear to be the vital contributing factors in the organizations’ ultimate success.

In this fast-paced environment, leadership and power have become the central behavioural concerns. The objective of the present study is to examine issues related to supervisory leadership influence on productivity and subordinates’ performance in India’s small manufacturing enterprises. French and Raven’s (1959) taxonomy of power bases has been used to examine the relationships between different types of power that a supervisor uses (coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent) and the followers’ work-related attitude and behaviour such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, propensity to leave, and attitudinal and behavioural compliances after correcting the deficiencies discussed above.

**EFFECTIVENESS OF LEADER POWER AND RELATED ISSUES**

In the US, earlier studies on leader power generally indicated that personal power bases (expert and referent) were more effective than position power bases (coercive, reward, legitimate). Recent studies (Morrow, 1997; Choi and Behling, 1997) on leadership in organizational setting show that performance-contingent reward is positively associated with satisfaction and performance of subordinates. However, performance-contingent coercive power base was not associated with satisfaction or performance of subordinates (Tepper, 2000).

*Organizational commitment* refers to “an active relationship with the organization such that individuals are willing to give something of themselves in order to contribute to the organization’s well-being” (Mowday, Steers and Porter, 1979). According to Korman, Greenhaus and Badin (1977), organizational commitment is a tendency to remain in one’s present organization as a result of perceived benefits acquired in one’s current employment compared to employment opportunities elsewhere. In the area of organizational behaviour, there were numerous studies on leader power or organizational commitment but little has been done to investigate the relationship between the two constructs. In sociological literature, following the works of Etzioni (1961, 1968) and others, Franklin (1975) found support for the proposition that the more normative (care-oriented) the power, the greater the commitment. He also reported that utilitarian (punishment-oriented) power was less effective in developing commitment to the organization. In terms of the French and Raven (1959) framework, one would expect a positive relationship between reward, expert, and referent power bases and organizational commitment and an inverse or non-significant relationship between coercive and legitimate power bases and commitment.

*Job satisfaction* refers to the persistent feelings a person has toward his work. The studies by Bachman (1968), Bachman, Smith and Slesinger (1966), and Bachman, Bowers and Marcus (1968) indicated that expert and referent power bases were positively related to the job satisfaction of employees and coercive power bases were negatively related to satisfaction. Reward and legitimate power bases were not consistently related to job satisfaction. Burke and Wilcox (1971) found similar relationships between the five power bases and employee satisfaction. Studies on leadership by Sims and Szilagyi (1975) and Podsakoff, Todor and Skov (1982) found that performance-contingent reward behaviour of the leader was positively correlated with job satisfaction. However, performance-based punishment behaviour of a superior had no impact whatsoever on the subordinate’s job satisfaction.

*Propensity to leave* refers to the inclination or tendency to leave the job. Student (1968) argues that employee’s withdrawal measures were negatively related to supervisor’s referent power base. Ivancevich and Donnelly (1970) found a negative relationship between sales managers’ expert and referent bases of power and sales representatives’ excused absenteeism. Busch (1980) reported that sales managers’ expert and referent
power bases were negatively related to the salespersons’ propensity to leave in two out of three firms surveyed. Compliance is that criterion measure in this study that is most directly linked to the outcome of power use. The most appropriate criterion measure should be based on followers’ compliance with leader’s influence attempts. Earlier studies on French and Raven’s (1959) power typology frequently touched upon subordinates’ compliance and effectiveness in relation to supervisor’s personal power bases (Bachman, 1968; Bachman, Bowers and Marcus, 1968; Bachman, Smith and Slesinger, 1966; Fontaine and Beerman, 1977; Ivancevich and Donnelly, 1970; Patchen, 1974; Spekman, 1979; Student, 1968). In a major study, Warren (1968) found that the use of five types of power by the principals was positively associated with total conformity of the teachers. The coefficient of correlation (r) between referent power and conformity was the highest (r = 0.75). Studies by Dunne, Stahl and Melhart (1978) and Thamhain and Gemmill (1974) indicated that expertise and professional challenge were also important reasons for compliance with the instructions of the project managers. In another study by Banker et al. (1996), using data from small size CPA firms in the Quebec Province of Canada, it was found that expertise, professional challenge, and target dates are the most important reasons for compliance with the superiors’ instructions. These studies generally indicated that subordinates perceived reward and coercive power as weak reasons for compliance with the wishes of the superior. Expert and referent, and to some extent, legitimate power bases generally induce both public and private compliance. These studies did not distinguish between attitude-based compliance and behaviour-based compliance; the former indicates the extent to which an employee wants to follow his superior’s directives or wishes while the latter focuses on the extent to which a subordinate actually carries out the instructions or wishes of his supervisor (Rahim and Buntzman, 1987). A power base is effective to the extent to which it can induce both attitudinal and behavioural compliances.

METHODOLOGY

Measures

Rahim Leader Power Inventory (RLPI) has been used to measure the five French and Raven (1959) bases of supervisory power. In the current study, the instrument has been slightly modified. Questions that were irrelevant for the targeted small business companies in India were dropped from the questionnaire. The remaining 26-item instrument used a 5-point Likert scale to measure the perceptions of subordinates regarding how much of each power base was possessed by their superiors. Reward and coercive power sub-scales were designed to measure the perceptions of subordinates to the extent of which their superiors could provide rewards or administer punishment respectively contingent upon performance. A higher score indicates a greater power base of a supervisor. A study by Rahim and Afza (1993) provided evidence of construct and criterion-related validities of the instrument.

Organizational commitment was measured with the short form of the organizational commitment questionnaire (Porter et al., 1974). This instrument contained nine items; for the current study, each item was cast on a 5-point Likert scale. The responses to the items were averaged to create a continuous scale of organizational commitment. Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979) summarized a series of studies which present evidence of satisfactory retest (ranging from 0.82 to 0.93) reliabilities and predictive, convergent, and discriminant validities of the scale.

Job satisfaction was measured with the job descriptive index (Smith, Kendall and Hulin, 1969). An ‘S’ describes a respondent’s satisfaction by means of ‘yes,’ ‘?’ or ‘no’ response to each of the 18 adjectives. The subscale was constructed by averaging the ‘S’ responses which ranged between 0 and 3. A higher score indicated greater satisfaction from work. Several studies have reported high reliability, construct, and criterion validities of the instrument (Imparato, 1972).

Propensity to leave was measured with the following two items: “If circumstances permitted, I would jump at the chance to accept a job in another organization” (Martin and Hunt, 1980). “If I was completely free to choose, I would prefer to continue working in this organization” (Donnelly and Ivancevich, 1975). The items were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale was constructed by averaging the ‘S’ responses to the items. A higher score indicated greater propensity to leave. Donnelly and Ivancevich (1975) and Martin and Hunt (1980) provided evidence of the scale’s criterion validity but not reliability.

Attitudinal and behavioural compliances were measured with ten items, e.g., “I like to do what my superior
suggests” (attitudinal), “I comply with the instruction of my superior” (behavioural) developed by Rahim (1986). Each item was cast on a 5-point Likert scale. The sub-scales for attitudinal and behavioural compliances were constructed by averaging the responses to five items for each sub-scale with the superior’s directives and wishes. Rahim (1986) provided evidence of construct and criterion validities of the sub-scales. The internal consistency reliabilities of the sub-scales were above 0.80.

Sample

A questionnaire was prepared with the above measures and given to 353 employees from 25 manufacturing companies in the Durgapur industrial zone in the state of West Bengal, India. The employees were randomly chosen from three departments of the targeted companies: production, marketing, and office administration. The owners/chief managers of the companies provided a complete list of the employees of these three departments.

The qualifications of the employees ranged from high school graduates to college graduates, engineers, chemists, cost accountants, and other professionals. The respondents represented different levels of educational attainment: high school graduates (n=151), bachelor’s degree (n=105), and cost accountants/analysts (n=33). The average work experience was more than 18 years for the top managers with technical expertise (n=32), 21 years for the senior engineers as mid-level managers (n=82), and 17 years for the computer specialists and others (n=38). The average work experience of the managers who are generalists at different levels is 16 years at the top level (n=14), 12 years at the mid-level (n=49), and 16 years at the lower level (n=126) of organizational hierarchy. The average length of work experience with the present company and the age of the respondents ranged between 2 and 22 years (SD=8.78) and 37 years (SD=11.35) respectively. Four of the targeted companies were in operation for more than 25 years. One was in operation for 31 years. The remaining companies were relatively younger, i.e., less than ten years old. The respondents were from more than 25 different companies covering six different industries.

Questionnaire and Procedure

A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and a self-addressed and post-paid envelope accompanied the questionnaire. The respondents were informed that for returning the completed questionnaires, they would be entitled to a token gift. The management of the participating companies was also promised a copy of the overall survey report for their internal evaluation and use. It was agreed by the CEOs of participating companies that the individual participants would fill out the forms on time and without any interference from the participants’ supervisors or other employees. The participants were requested to return their questionnaires within two weeks from the day they were received. All 353 questionnaires were returned on time to a rented post office box in Durgapur city. Twelve of them could not be used because of instructional violations in the response data. Data from the remaining 341 questionnaires were processed for output analysis.

Analysis and Results

The number of items, mean, standard deviations, and internal consistency reliabilities of all the behavioural variables as assessed by Cronbach (1951) alpha are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows 17 instead of 18 items for the job satisfaction sub-scale listed in the survey questionnaire. For the construction of this sub-scale, total correlation was dropped for one item that was negative. The reliability coefficients for all the variables were satisfactory.
Table 2 shows zero-order correlations between the five dependent and five independent variables. Forty-two of the 45 correlations were significant at 0.05 levels. The correlations between the dependent and independent variables were in the expected directions.

**Regression Analysis**

The regression analysis was run with the five power bases as independent variables and commitment, satisfaction, intent to leave, and attitudinal and behavioural compliances as the dependent variables with SPSS-X computer package. The results in Table 3 show that the test with Pillais’ criterion was significant approximately at \( F=11.19, p<.0001 \). This indicated that there were significant relationships between the two groups of variables. However, the step-wise multivariate data analysis was not shown in this paper. Table 3 presents the results of multiple regression analysis which investigated these relationships.

Table 3 also shows that performance contingent reward power and expert and referent power bases of leaders positively influenced organizational commitment of followers. The influence of performance-contingent reward power and legitimate power bases on commitment was negative but non-significant. These results are consistent with the literature.

**Table 2: Zero-order Correlations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referent</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.27</td>
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<td>Organizational</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-0.70</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propensity to leave</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudinal compliance</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavioural compliance</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note: \( r > .30 p < .05 \) (two-tailed).*

**Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Organizational Commitment</th>
<th>Job Satisfaction</th>
<th>Propensity to Leave</th>
<th>Attitudinal Commitment</th>
<th>Behavioural Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>-0.0753</td>
<td>-0.0654</td>
<td>0.1345*</td>
<td>-0.0537</td>
<td>0.1453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>0.1843**</td>
<td>0.2114*</td>
<td>-0.2192**</td>
<td>0.0987</td>
<td>0.0249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>-0.0821</td>
<td>-0.0872</td>
<td>0.1061</td>
<td>0.0658</td>
<td>0.4157***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>0.1217*</td>
<td>0.0943</td>
<td>-0.2644**</td>
<td>0.4345***</td>
<td>0.1944**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referent</td>
<td>0.4842***</td>
<td>0.4439***</td>
<td>-0.3561</td>
<td>0.4593***</td>
<td>-0.0251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-square</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.32***</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.49***</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***, **, and * respectively indicate significance at less than 1%, 1%, and 5% level.
The results in this study clearly show that both position (performance-contingent coercive and reward) and personal power bases influenced employees’ propensity to leave.

The results show that expert and referent power bases positively influenced attitudinal compliance and legitimate and expert power bases positively influenced behavioural compliance. It is not clear, however, why referent power base failed to influence subordinates’ behavioural compliance. In a high power-distance society such as India, it is a real surprise. As a possible explanation, it may be argued that in the small business environment of any society, be it India or the US, the challenge for short-term survival easily overshadows many ideal long-term oriented and healthier managerial practices. The results in this section were in accord with the study by Rahim and Buntzman (1987). These were also consistent with Warren’s (1968) study which reported that all the five power bases were correlated with an overall measure of compliance. Warren’s (1968) study computed rank-order correlations which compare well with the zero-order correlations reported in Table 2.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between bases of leader power and several criterion variables such as commitment, satisfaction, intent to leave, and compliance. The validity of the results depends, to a great extent, on the psychometric adequacies of the measurement instruments and the nature of the sample used. Therefore, an attempt was made to select psychometrically sound measures of the independent and dependent variables and to collect data with these measures from a random sample of managers from the selected small business enterprises in Durgapur industrial zone. This study indicated that performance-contingent reward power base and expert and referent power bases of the leaders were more effective in influencing the followers’ organizational commitment, job satisfaction, propensity to leave, and attitudinal and behavioural compliance. However, the correlations between the variables were found to be stronger in India than those in the US. The performance-contingent coercive power was ineffective in influencing any significant outcome from the followers. This finding is consistent with the findings of the same study in the US (Rahim and Afza, 1993). The legitimate power base was only effective in enhancing behavioural compliance. Too much dependence on this power base alone to gain compliance may not be effective because this power base cannot induce other positive outcomes from the subordinates.

This study has partly replicated the results of an earlier study using data from the US accountants (Rahim and Afza, 1993). The latter study was more comprehensive in scope. The current study did not replicate any other study even partially because of the shortcoming of the pervious studies as discussed before. Rahim (1986) and Podsakoff and Schriesheim (1984) particularly noted the deficiencies of the coercive and reward sub-scales of the two instruments used in the earlier studies. As can be seen, the inconsistencies in the results of the earlier studies were with these two sub-scales.

The results of this study are consistent with many of the findings of more recent studies done in the US (Tepper, 2000; Ball et al., 1994). There were some major differences between the findings of the present and other recent studies which may be attributed to the type of professionals who participated in this study and the socio-economic and cultural differences between the US and India. One important limitation of the present study is that the relationships discussed are correlational and not causal. Experimental studies are needed to investigate causal links between the bases of leader power and criterion variables.

The findings of this study can be used to re-examine and revitalize an organization’s motivation environment in small business enterprises. However, further studies are needed to determine how leaders in small business organizational settings in less developed socio-economic and cultural environments effectively influence their subordinates. In the absence of new evidence, we can conclude that performance-contingent reward and expert and referent power bases are most effective in influencing subordinates to achieve individual and organizational objectives. These power bases are influential predictors in the US, a society that is characterized by high level of individualistic materialism, low power-distance, and strong entrepreneurial mental behaviour. In India, the power bases are likely to be even more influential because of the society’s unique socio-cultural characteristics. India’s social environment is high on power-distance that commands loyalty and possibly accountability in small business sector. The influence of Confucian philosophy and Gandhian values are also the likely factors that differentiate India’s culture base from that of the US. However, further studies of superior-
subordinate relationships and their effects on motivation and compliance using India’s cultural factors are 

**REFERENCES**


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While we have gift of life, it seems to me the only tragedy is to allow part of us to die whether it is our spirit, our creativity or our glorious uniqueness.

Gilda Radner