

# The cultural dimensions of Italian leadership: Power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity from an American perspective

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## Abstract

This article provides a cultural analysis of Italian leadership from a cross-cultural perspective. Americans view Italian leaders with cultural lenses and stereotypes often exaggerated by the media. Effective cross-cultural, business and international relations with Italians and Italian descendants require awareness of the true cultural dimensions beyond stereotypes and media portraits. Through the examination of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE studies), this study reviews the cultural dimensions called power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity in relation to Italian leadership. From a cross-cultural and American standpoint, the author provides a cultural analysis of globally recognized Italian cultural dimensions that explain and enlighten more effective leadership practice and communication across borders and cultures.

## Keywords

cultural dimensions, Italian leadership, power distance, uncertainty, masculinity

Italian leadership, in its practices, values and dysfunctional dynamics, cannot be fully understood without a study of its cultural context. This assertion is not exclusive to Italian leadership and it is not new. Implicit leadership theory (ILT) and its extension called culturally implicit leadership theory (CLT) (Dorfman et al., 2004; Schyns and Meindl, 2005; Yukl, 2010) have contributed to the understanding of cultural influences in leadership. ILT states that individuals gradually develop a set of beliefs about the behaviors and characteristics of leaders. A key element of this theory is that leadership is an “implicit social label” viewed from the “the eye of the beholder” (Dorfman et al., 2004: 670; Lord and Maher, 1991).

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This theory at a cultural level of analysis argues that “the structure and contexts of these belief systems will be shared among individuals in common cultures” (Dorfman et al., 2004: 669). Although most cross-cultural research emphasizes how cultural groups perceive differently what leadership should entail, there are a number of recognized cultural dimensions explaining different perceptions and expectations in leadership across national cultures.

A cultural analysis of Italian leadership begins with the three most recognized cultural dimensions identified by Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010) as “power distance,” “uncertainty avoidance” and “masculinity” and largely confirmed in the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) studies (Carl et al., 2004). Cultural analysis of key dimensions and endemic dynamics between leaders and followers is necessary for recognizing authentic values in cross-cultural relations and for going beyond cultural stereotypes, prejudices and ethnocentrism (Northouse, 2009: 336–337). The often biased and stereotypical way in which Italian leadership is perceived from across the ocean is largely due to media-portrayed Italian figures and Italian culture. However, the differences in power, uncertainty, masculinity and other cultural dynamics performance can be instrumental in promoting more authentic Italian leadership perceptions across Italian and cross-cultural relations. Through the examination of these cultural dimensions in relation to Italian leadership, this cultural analysis contextualizes the perception of power (and authority), uncertainty (and risk) and masculinity (with women and gender) in relation to Italian socio-historical and religious-cultural background. Before we review how Italian leadership scores in relation to these cultural dimensions, we need to consider cultural dimensions as they emerged in the Hofstede and GLOBE studies. We also need to review the historical and religious contexts of Italian leadership as they explain the cultural dynamics between leaders and followers. Finally, the analysis offers some applications of these cultural dynamics on contemporary examples of Italian and Italian-American leadership from the public and private sector.

### Cultural leadership dimensions

The Geert Hofstede (1980, 2001, 2011) and GLOBE studies (Carl et al., 2004) represent the most authoritative and comprehensive empirical studies on implicit and culturally specific leadership dimensions. Clustered with other Latin European cultures, Italian leadership manifests a more charismatic/value-based, team-oriented, participative and self-protective type of leadership while downplaying independent leadership and the human side of leadership (Carl et al., 2004; Northouse, 2009: 342). Conceived by US business scholar Robert J House in 1991, the GLOBE studies originally focused on leadership but soon branched out to consider other cultural dimensions of organizations, nations and societies. The comprehensive cross-cultural study of leadership in 62 societies concluded that different cultures are apt to have different understandings of leadership. The GLOBE studies maintained Hofstede’s *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance* and *future orientation* dimensions, and added *humane orientation*, *performance orientation*, and expanded *masculinity-femininity* into *assertiveness* and *gender egalitarianism*. House and his collaborators also split the *individualism-collectivism* dimension into *institutional collectivism* and *in-group collectivism*, organizing the analysis into a total of nine cultural dimensions. The GLOBE studies also identify six global leadership behaviors (leadership dimensions) labeled as charismatic/value-based, team-oriented, participative, humane-oriented, autonomous and self-protective (Carl et al., 2004: 21). On the question of which level of power utilization would make a leader

more effective, the GLOBE studies conclude and demonstrate that it depends on the context and cultural differences of an organization or society (Carl et al., 2004: 535).

Particularly at the level of organizational leaders, the Hofstede and GLOBE studies demonstrate how cultures shape both the followers and leaders' perception, validation and acceptance level of power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity (Hanges and Dickson, 2004). Several leadership studies (Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003; Shaw, 1990) confirm the strong influence of cultural values in leadership belief systems and in the context of leader attributes and behaviors perceived as desirable and effective by individuals in that culture (Dorfman et al., 2004: 672). However, the perception, expectation and value judgment of leaders depend on the follower's cultural dimensions. In the case of power relations between Italian leaders and followers, the historical and religious contexts best explain contemporary examination of power distance and other connected cultural dimensions.

### **Cultural hegemony in Italian leadership**

The power and cultural dynamics between leaders and followers were first analyzed by Niccoló Machiavelli and later reinterpreted by Antonio Gramsci. As a diplomat and civil servant of the Florentine Republic, Machiavelli (1469–1527) wrote about leadership and power, how to maintain it and shape it successfully. Political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime, argued that leaders maintain power not simply by force and control but mainly through cultural hegemony (Fontana, 1993). In his analysis of political hegemony and international relations, Gramsci argued that cultural hegemony is exemplified in the cultural "leadership" or dominance of one social class over another and the maintenance of the socio-political status quo (Holsti, 1985). Cultural hegemony is therefore about the maintenance of power of the (*hegemon*) leader who dominates followers of subordinated social classes through "persuasion" with a combination of "coercion and consent" (Fontana, 1993: 30). As Machiavelli and Gramsci already figured out in their time, leaders exert their power in more sophisticated and subtle ways and not always by totalitarian expressions and bold demands. Bates (1975) understood the social and cultural nuance of Gramsci's theory of hegemonic powers: "A social order, no matter how exploitative, cannot be understood simply as a conspiracy of wicked rulers. Rulers who can make a society work, who can make millions of people do their bidding and make them do it without the lash, are competent rulers" (p.365).

Gramsci's analysis of Italian society under a fascist regime and its leader, Mussolini, explains how the Catholic Church helped influence the submissiveness of Italian people (Gentile, 1996). Although generally concerned about the worldviews perpetrated by the preaching and practices of the Church, he sees the Papacy and the hierarchy of the Church as key players in perpetrating the status quo and the dominating feudal system (Fontana, 1993: 69).

The dominant presence of the Roman Catholic Church has deeply influenced Italian cultural values and its tolerance to unequal distribution of power, commonly known as power distance. (Carl et al., 2004: 519). The fascist regime under the Duce (leader) Mussolini gained political support and blessing of the Roman Catholic Church, with only few exceptions of dissent and resistance. Don Lorenzo Milani (1923–1967), for example, was an inspiring key figure resisting fascist hegemonic powers and the complacent Catholic doctrine and practice. However, the Roman Catholic Church has, for the most part,

influenced Italian culture to accept the status quo, resist change and accept hierarchical distribution of power (Gentile, 1996). This ‘Catholic’ cultural effect is confirmed by the GLOBE studies. “Although present day Catholicism is more benign than in previous centuries it still supports the status quo in many societies, and it continues to recognize women as unsuitable to hold the higher positions within the Church establishment. Consequently, societies that have been primarily Roman Catholic tend to be high in power distance, whereas Protestant societies prefer lower power distance” (Carl et al., 2004: 520).

## Power distance and Italian leadership

In Geert Hofstede’s original research on cultural values across 53 countries (later expanded to 76), Italy is associated with other countries that tolerate more power distance. Broadly speaking, power distance is a cultural dimension that reflects the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authority, power differences and status privileges (Carl et al., 2004). That is, Italians accept and somehow expect that some groups in society are more powerful than others. They act accordingly in their exercise of leadership and in the followers’ acceptance of it. Quantified by Hofstede as *Power Distance Index* (PDI), this dimension of culture attempts to measure societal acceptance and expectations of unequal power relations between leaders and followers, bosses and subordinates, parents and children, and teachers and students (Hofstede, 2001: 80–83). Borrowing from the Dutch social psychologist Mauk Mulder’s study on power (1977), Hofstede defines power distance as “The power distance between a boss B and a subordinate S in a hierarchy is the difference between the extent to which B can determine the behavior of S and the extent to which S can determine the behavior of B” (Hofstede, 2001: 83). In other words, power distance is “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede et al., 2010: 61).

The concept of power distance suggests that a society’s level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. “Power and inequality, of course, are extremely fundamental facts of any society and anybody with some international experience will be aware that ‘all societies are unequal’, but some are more unequal than others” (Hofstede, 2011).

In Hofstede’s Value Survey Modules (VSMs), the power distance dimension is measured along *practice*, *perception* and *preference* for equality or inequality between leaders and followers, or bosses and subordinates in organizations: 1) *Practice*: subordinates’ level of fear in expressing disagreement with the leader/manager 2) *Perception*: subordinates’ perception of the boss’s actual decision-making style going from an autocratic style to a paternalistic style; 3) *Preference*: subordinates’ preference for their boss’s decision-making style going from an autocratic to a more paternalistic or, on the contrary, a style based on majority vote, but not a consultative style (Carl et al., 2004: 56). Knowing power distance levels can help us estimate leaders’ and followers’ values, attitudes and behaviors. In small-power-distance (low PDI) countries, subordinates have limited *dependency* on (and tolerance for) autocratic or paternalistic leaders, and they prefer more equal and *interdependent* types of relationships. On the contrary, in large-power-distance (high PDI) countries, subordinates have a considerable *dependency* (and expectation) on their autocratic or paternalistic leaders and bosses (Carl et al., 2004: 61).

Italy’s PDI score is 50 (ranked 51 out of 76 countries), not as high as Malaysia (104), Philippines (94) or the Arab world (80), but higher than the United States (40),

Denmark (18) and Austria (11) (Hofstede, 2001: 87). So Italy's power distance score ranks relatively high compared with other Western countries, yet falls in the middle of the index overall. This is exemplified by how Italians expect differences and formality in titles and status while they often express cynicism about persons in positions of authority. Italians are also known for generally supporting the breaking of petty rules (e.g. bypassing lines or not complying with the rules of the road). They also love to ridicule authority and people in positions of power (Flower and Falassi, 2006).

The Hofstede and GLOBE studies identify societies, leaders and subordinates along these opposing power distance dynamics (see Table 1) (Carl et al., 2004; Hofstede et al., 2010: 72, 76, 83).

Although leaders might adopt different styles in their performance in organizations and institutions, the acceptance of their democratic/participatory or autocratic/paternalistic style depends on the culture of the organizations, institutions and countries. Hofstede assumes the Italian PDI scores, if controlled by North and South regions, probably would show respectively lower and higher PDIs (Hofstede et al., 2010: 81). In the leadership images suggested by Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), Northern Italy would relate more to the "fox" model while Southern Italy would resemble the "lion" model. What the association between political systems and citizens' mental software suggests is that "which animal the ruler should impersonate depends strongly on what type of animals the followers are" (Hofstede et al., 2010: 81).

With the preference for democratic governance and transformational types of leadership, the expression of power, authority and influence has become more cunning, crafty and sophisticated (Kellerman, 2010). In low-power-distance democratic societies, as in participatory organizations, effective leaders often use power in a subtle manner that presents less evidence in diminishing a subordinate's self-esteem and undermines status inequalities (Yukl, 2010). Leadership and power therefore are more about "influencing" a subordinate or peer to action rather than "imposing" and ordering someone to complete a task. It is about the *power of persuasion* as an interpersonal communication process (face-to-face verbal and non-verbal interaction) intended to consciously or unconsciously persuade the individual, rather than overtly coerce him or her (Soder, 2001). Influence skills therefore are becoming

**Table 1.** Power distance leadership dynamics.

Small power distance	Large power distance
The desired leader/boss is a resourceful democrat	The desired leader/boss is a benevolent autocrat or "good father"
Subordinates expect to be consulted	Subordinates expect to be told what to do
Decentralization is popular	Centralization is popular
Fewer supervisors and control	More supervisors and control
Managers rely on their own experience and on subordinates	Managers rely on superiors and on formal rules
All should have equal rights	The powerful should have privileges
Social relationships should be handled with care	Status should be balanced with restraint
Less-powerful people are emotionally comfortable with interdependence	Less-powerful people are emotionally polarized between dependence and counter dependence
Information is shared	Information is localized
High upward social mobility	Limited upward social mobility

progressively more decisive in leadership effectiveness as firms shift to flatter organizational structures in an attempt to foster higher levels of performance, engagement and entrepreneurship. This power transformation has been a challenge in the leadership and management of small and medium family-based Italian enterprises (Corbetta and Montemerlo, 1999). Today, with the increasing competition of a global market economy and the diversification of the Italian immigrant labor force, this transformation is critical (Antonietti and Antonioli, 2011). Cohen and Federico (2001) argue that “small Italian firms benefited from unique social interactions that resulted from shared values and belief systems,” managing to make Italy, in spite of the odds, “one of the world’s richest and economically advanced countries in the world” (p.107).

### Uncertainty avoidance and Italian leadership

Admitting mistakes and showing uncertainty is not commonly associated with “Made in Italy” leadership styles. Although the handling of uncertainty is part and parcel of any leader or human institution in any country, Italy scores 75 (ranked 33/76) in Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) – a fairly high level in comparison with other Northern European countries (Hofstede et al., 2010: 193). Hofstede defines uncertainty avoidance as the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations:

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) deals with a society’s tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; it ultimately refers to man’s search for Truth. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. [...] Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures, and on the philosophical and religious level by a belief in absolute Truth; ‘there can only be one Truth and we have it.’ [...] The opposite type, uncertainty accepting cultures, are more tolerant of opinions different from what they are used to [...]. (Hofstede, 2011)

Italians “avoid risk and uncertainty in everyday life, preferring friends over strangers and familiar over new or strange situations” (Gannon and Pillai, 2010: 372). For high-level UAI cultures this means that what is different is dangerous and ambiguity creates intolerable anxiety. Every human being has developed mechanisms for coping with the uncertainty of the future and new situations. Traditional and modern societies alike alleviate these anxieties with the help of technology, law and religion (Hofstede, 2001: 147). Technology helps people to avoid uncertainties caused by nature; laws and regulations try to prevent uncertainty from the behaviors of other people and religion helps followers to find certainty on transcendental forces and unanswered realities like death (Hofstede et al., 2010: 189)

Most Orthodox and Roman Catholic countries (with the exception of the Philippines and Ireland) score high on uncertainty avoidance. Although religious conversion does not necessarily determine a change in cultural values, Western religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) base their precepts on absolute “Truth” through divine revelation. According to Hofstede, the cultural consequence of these religious beliefs is that “there is only one Truth and we have it. All others are wrong. Possessing this Truth is the only road to salvation and the main purpose in a person’s life. The consequence of the others being wrong may be trying to convert them, avoiding them, or killing them”

(Hofstede et al., 2010: 227). The Catholic Church, like radical evangelical sects and fundamentalist groups, appeals to cultures with the need for certainty. Unlike weak uncertainty avoidance cultures where rules can be changed if there is evidence that it cannot be respected, high UAI countries assign individual blame, as in the case of Catholic confession of sins, as a way of putting the blame on the individual while preserving the rule (Hofstede et al., 2010: 228)

Cultures with absolute religious certainty find fertile ground for charismatic leadership tied with absolute ideologies (Carl et al., 2004: 642–643). The case of Benito Mussolini as an absolute leader and the support he received from the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church exemplify the connection between uncertainty avoidance cultures, power distance and masculinity. Richard Lynn's longitudinal study in Italy, Germany and Japan (the WWII Axis powers), among other nations, shows that when the anxiety level increases in a country, uncertainty avoidance also increases (Hofstede, 2001: 182). This is noticeable when in a country's increase of intolerance, xenophobia, religious and political fanaticism, the power often is transferred to charismatic and fanatical leaders (Hofstede et al., 2010: 233; Samuels, 2003). Uncertainty avoidance is therefore another cultural dimension observable in the leaders' conservative views often associated with inflexibility, dogmatism and traditionalism.

## Masculinity in Italian leadership

Hofstede defines "masculine" and "feminine" dimensions (measured as masculinity index "MAS" in his Value Survey Modules) beyond gender absolute differences (e.g. bearing or begetting of children) and statistical differences (e.g. on average men are taller and stronger while women have greater finger dexterity and faster metabolisms) (Hofstede et al., 2010: 136). Instead, he focuses on relative characteristics of "masculine" and "feminine" defined by culturally determined roles in societies (e.g. men can behave in a "feminine" way and women in a "masculine" way as they deviate from certain conventions in their societies) (Hofstede et al., 2010: 137). Hofstede recognizes how masculinity, as a mental program, is both socially and emotionally defined:

A society is called *masculine* when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. A society is called *feminine* when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. (Hofstede et al., 2010: 140)

Italy is a fairly masculine society with an MAS index of 70 and ranking of seven out of 76 countries, ahead of any other Latin European countries and the United States, which ranks 19 (score 62). Although women have entered the workforce in Italy, still very few occupy high-level leadership and managerial positions. According to a study by Campa, Casarico and Profeta (2009), the gender gap in leadership and employment in Italy is connected to cultural family values. About 27 percent of women quit work after having their first child, and less than 10 percent of toddlers have access to preschool nurseries. Grandparents often become the main providers of childcare (Campa et al., 2009). In spite of the fact that more Italian women than men have university degrees, only 46 percent of Italian women are employed, compared with an average of 59 percent for the European Union (Guerrina, 2005: 114).

In their cross-cultural analysis of leadership, Traquandi and Castellucci (2002) consider the impact of certain aspects of Italian managerial culture and context on leadership preferences. They recognize how Italian companies expect that their high-potential management (HPM) would be a man (p.111). “At the same time, and for the same reason, Italian women generally do not find it interesting to be HPM candidates. With some exceptions, this division of roles is considered a natural situation by both sexes. Undoubtedly, this attitude stems from the Catholic culture, which, although it is slowly fading in Italy, still influences unconscious behavior and personal decision making” (pp.111–112).

The connections between “masculinity,” “uncertainty” and “power” dynamics are visible in some Italian-descent leaders in the United States often associated with conservative political views. Former New York City Mayor Rudolph “Rudy” Giuliani is an example. Although primarily about his leadership philosophy, Rudy Giuliani’s post 9/11 book on leadership attempts to distinguish public service leadership from personal affairs and failures: “The dissolution of my marriage, for example, had nothing to do with my public performance and never affected it in any way...if we as a nation expect to attract real people to public life, we have to do what we can not to intrude on matters that don’t affect a public figure’s duties and performance” (Giuliani and Kurson, 2002: xxii). This view of leadership that separates public performance from private affairs is largely accepted in Italy and Europe but questioned in the eyes of America’s puritan values (Bercovitch, 2011). Giuliani’s alleged affairs or President Bill Clinton’s mini-escapade with a White House intern are just drops in the ocean in comparison with the sexual missteps committed by Italian and European political leaders, but Americans still judge leaders on both their personal life and public performance (Rhode, 2006).

On the one hand, Italians generally do not care about the private sexual adventures of their public leaders. On the other hand, Italian society continues by and large to privilege men over women (Gannon and Pillai, 2010: 365). In spite of the numerous transformations and achievements, Italian women still face an uphill battle between a society privileging male leadership and a Catholic Church dismissing abortion and divorce. Gannon and Pillai write:

Divorce and abortion have recently been legalized in Italy. Legal abortion symbolizes the loosening of individual morals and the breaking of the hold of the Catholic Church over the family. In 1974 civil divorce became legal, but it seems to be more a symbol of social independence than anything else. Not many marriages have actually ended in divorce. For example, Italy has only 0.8 divorces per 1,000 [couples], whereas the comparable figure in the United States is 4.8, second only to Aruba’s 5.3. The number of separated couples however, has increased significantly. (Gannon and Pillai, 2010: 365)

As the Italian culture and Catholic morality view divorce as a threat to the foundation of the family, a woman seeking divorce faces numerous impediments including difficulty in accessing legal services, church community rejection and financial dependence. Like other masculine contexts and clearly defined gender roles in societies, Italian women struggle to find equal employment and career opportunities. According to the 2010 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report, Italy ranks 74th out of 134 countries in equality between men and women — at the bottom of the European Union ranking along with Hungary, Malta and Cyprus (Hausmann et al., 2010).

In Italy, the most entrenched power structures instilled for centuries by the Roman Catholic Church and organized crime remain male-dominated. In a recent *New York*

*Times* article Elizabetta Provoledo and Rachel Donadio (2011) analyze the recent Berlusconi sex scandal in light of Italian culture and lack of female leadership. Indeed, in a country where leadership opportunities still come primarily from family ties and party connections rather than meritocracy, “Italian women face an uphill battle” (Provoledo and Donadio, 2011). For example, the few Italian female leaders in politics and commerce come from powerful families. Marina Berlusconi, chairwoman of the *Fininvest Group*, which includes *Mondadori* publishing and major TV networks, is Mr Berlusconi’s daughter. In male-dominated society, politics, and economy, Italian women struggle to get recognition beyond the “devoted housewife” portrayed by the Catholic Church and the so-called “*veline*,” sexy showgirls who have been the hallmark of Mr Berlusconi’s television networks since the 1980s (Morvillo, 2003). Ms Emma Marcegaglia, the first woman to lead *Confindustria*, the most important Italian major industries association, is the heiress of a steel fortune. Commenting on her own leadership as a woman, Ms Marcegaglia recently said, “It took them nearly 100 years to appoint a woman, and they chose the worst economic moment” (Provoledo and Donadio, 2011). However, stereotypical and prototypical characterization of Italian women in leadership is often contradicted by studies on the more complex and often subtle sexism in the workplace (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Things are changing in the Italian leadership landscape, but they are changing rather slowly.

## Overcoming Italian cultural stereotypes

The examination of power, uncertainty and masculinity dynamics is essential in understanding Italian leaders beyond superficial generalizations, biased images and cultural stereotypes. Although present in every cross-cultural encounter, stereotypes are always a distorted or partial representation of complex realities (Connell and Gardaphé, 2010; Macrae et al., 1996). Unfortunately, media and migration dynamics often contribute to stereotypical characterization of leadership values. Americans view Italian leadership values through the lenses provided by Hollywood classic films like *The Godfather* and popular TV series like *The Sopranos*. Such mafia-related Italian and Italian-American images portray three quite prevalent stereotypes of Italian and Italian-Americans: food, family and violence (Ciongoli, 1998: 53). In a thorough review of American films portraying Italians between 1928 and 2002, the Italic Institute of America points to *The Godfather* as a major contributor of negative stereotyping of Italian culture in the United States (Italic Institute of America, 2002). As the fifth-largest ethnic group in the United States, Italian-Americans reflect stereotypical images such as organized crime, spaghetti with meatballs and Italian men as womanizers. In addition, if 85% of Italian men aged 18–33 live with their parents it is not necessarily because “Italian men have an unhealthy obsession with their mothers” but because the youth need to cope with high unemployment rates (Manacorda and Moretti, 2002).

Like American and Italian, also Italian-American culture is a socially constructed reality characterized by variations and changes in time and places. As empirically and convincingly demonstrated by Robert Putnam and colleagues (1993), the variation in regional traditions explains civic traditions, the shape of current cultural norms and institutional values. Italian cultural identification, with the exception of national soccer games and ethnocentric claims against immigrants, it is primarily a regional phenomenon. Even with the phenomenon of Italian Diasporas, the North-South and regional distinctions are still evident within the language and traditions of immigrant communities and Italian descendants (Graziano, 2010).

The linguistic tools used for centuries by the various populations that were brought together under the virtual name of “Italians” created more division than cohesion. The persistence of dialects is like a dust left by the peninsula’s history of fragmentation; the Italian language, for its part, was just one more sign of not only regional and local divisions (sometimes even division between a city’s neighborhoods) but also social division. (Graziano, 2010: 62–63)

Italian cultural stereotypes are not all negative. For example, Italian and non-Italian businesses abroad have been using the universally recognized positive values connected to Italy’s good life (*la dolce vita*) in the arts, cuisine and style associated with the adjective “Tuscan” and the name Toscana (Tuscany) or term “Made in Italy” or “Italian Style.” Beyond stereotypes, cultural images and metaphors are helpful tools in developing cultural awareness and competency in dealing effectively with Italian people, businesses and leaders worldwide. Martin Gannon’s *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys Through 29 Nations, Clusters of Nations, Continent and Diversity* explains Italian cultural characteristics through the image of the Italian opera (Gannon and Pillai, 2010: 351–372). Opera represents most features of Italian culture beginning with the *overture* (symbolizing the time and ceremonies before getting down to business) to the *chorus and soloists* (symbolizing the overall embodiment of the national Italian culture and the distinct regional identities).

The Italian word that expresses the idea of belonging first to a town, than to a region, and third to a nation is *campanilismo*, derived from *campanile*, which means, “bell tower.” It refers to the fact that people do not want to travel so far as to be out of sight of the piazza church steeple. (Gannon and Pillai, 2010: 369)

This cultural attitude of partisanship is expressed in the factionalism of Italian politics with a situation of multiplicity of parties and changing alliances, and is unique in Europe. Most Americans view the plethora of 39 current Italian national parties (plus the 52 regional parties and two parties for Italians abroad) as a sign of dysfunctional governance. Although partly instrumental in maintaining long-term leadership positions such as that of Mr Berlusconi, the heterogeneity of Italian parties starting with post-fascism to Marxism blended with environmentalism and feminism represents a break from the long-time hegemonic power of the church-sponsored Christian Democratic (*Democrazia Cristiana*) party dissolved in 1993. While Catholics are to be found in the leadership of almost every Italian party, the diversity guarantees that no party can claim the “sponsorship” of the church, leading to a more clear separation of church and state (Moliterno, 2000: 160).

## Cultural applications and implications

Moving beyond stereotypes and biased images, understanding cultural dimensions is critical for improving Italian global leadership performance. The characterization of cultural dimensions of power distance–proximity, uncertainty avoidance–acceptance and masculinity–femininity can be quite instrumental in enhancing the capacity of leaders to effectively enter into global businesses, international relations and collaborations. One of the limits of this cultural analysis is the lack of qualitative and comparative data on contemporary cultural dimensions across Italian and Italian-American leadership practices. Recognizing cultural values should be the first fundamental step in a cultural leadership analysis. Various scholars have recognized the strong connection in measuring existing “practices” and desired “values” of cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010: 43). However, as values, more than

practices, are the stable element in culture (Hofstede et al., 2010: 28), studying value-based cultural dimensions of societies can be key to predicting global collaborations, international relations and organizational changes (Dorfman et al., 2004: 709).

The stereotypical image of the Italian autocratic boss no longer fits the needs for competent, innovative and collaborative leaders needed to renew the economic vitality of the country. Sergio Marchionne, the Italian-Canadian businessman and CEO of the recently merged Fiat SpA and Chrysler Group LLC, represents this new kind of Italian leadership power. As he acknowledges, the issue of Italian economic recovery is linked to a shared and globally competent leadership:

From day one I recognized that Fiat had a leadership problem. Traditionally, all-important decisions in Italian companies are made by the CEO. It probably worked fine as a leadership model back in the 1950s, but today it's quite unsustainable. A business like Fiat is far too large and complicated for one man alone to lead. (Marchionne, 2008)

Whether he will succeed or not in executing his future big plans with the Fiat–Chrysler merger, Marchionne has set a new leadership paradigm for other CEOs by clearly admitting the company's failures. The challenge now is how to tackle American stereotypes for the Italian automaker. When Fiat pulled out of the US market in the mid-1980s due to a reputation of poor quality, Americans joked that the acronym Fiat meant “Fix it again, Tony” (it actually means *Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino*—Italian Factory for Automobiles in Turin).

Effective Italian global leadership would need to manifest competent cultural intelligence, also known as “CQ” (Livermore, 2010; Thomas and Inkson, 2004). Cultural analysis is instrumental to enhance the cultural intelligence and leadership effectiveness of leaders who manage culturally diverse work teams. At a political leadership level, the awareness of implicit culturally shaped leadership values of a group, society or country could be a determinant in her/his intercultural communication effectiveness (Moodian, 2009). Beside the economic, cultural and political relations between Italian and American culture(s), the advantages of recognizing cultural value differences and affinities is instrumental in developing effective cross-cultural relations beyond superficial stereotypes and *campanilismi* fostering detrimental isolation rather than profitable collaborations.

Globalization and regionalization are rapidly changing Italy's culture and its leaders. Globally integrated economic systems cooped with European levels of governance challenge current Italian leadership to adapt and work on adequately preparing future leaders. Hence, Italian leadership is not only linked to cultural issues but also to educational challenge linked to economic recovery. If it is true that in the United States, as in all other countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), nearly eight in 10 new jobs will require workforce training or a higher education by the end of this decade (Obama, 2009), then Italy needs to invest in higher (tertiary) education to develop competent leaders for the 21st century.

Italy, one of the founders of the European Union and the world's seventh-largest economy, faces numerous challenges and opportunities in leadership development and education. In spite of Italy's affordable, low-cost higher education (7.89 percent GDP per capita), which is much lower than American higher education costs (25.71 percent GDP per capita), the percentage of Italian population completing university-level and vocational tertiary education is only 6.05 percent, less than a third of the United States ratio (UNESCO, 2006). Politico-economic pressures are coupled with the changes in the socio-cultural trends of

the country. According to *Eurostat*, Italy has one of the lowest birthrates in the European Union, at 1.4 child per woman, and spends only 1.1 percent of its GDP on childcare and other family incentives. Italy has the second-oldest population among nations following Japan, with 25.6 percent of its population over the age of 60. The country has also the second-highest rate net migration among the 27 EU member states (European Commission, 2010). Through education and renewed counter-hegemonic consciousness Italy will be able to overcome its not-so-positive leadership examples and moral reputation.

## Conclusion

Just as organizational culture is intertwined with leadership (Schein, 2010), cultural dimensions also shape leadership perception and value judgments. Cultural values and assumptions will always influence how we assess and follow leaders. However, the awareness and analytical capacity to discern leader–follower cultural dimensions will increase our consciousness to approve or disapprove, support or challenge current and future leaders. This cultural analysis of Italian and Italian-American leadership offered a few dimensions for understanding how culture influences and changes a leader’s performance and perception. Beyond ethnocentric views, stereotypes or superficial interpretations, a cultural analysis of leadership can enhance cross-cultural capacity for leaders and followers alike. It can provide the dimensions that, as a common language, can improve our dialogue and collaboration beyond borders and local/ethnic diversity.

Italians, like Americans and most cultural groups and societies worldwide, are affected by common basic issues: social inequality including its relationship with authority; the societal appreciation of masculinity and femininity values; and the ways of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity. Focusing a cultural analysis on these three cultural dimensions is a good start but it clearly is an incomplete analysis. Many other studies have focused on additional cultural dimensions such as individual/collective and long term/short term orientations (Hofstede et al., 2010), terminal values like “equality” and “instrumental values” like honesty (Schwartz, 2007), assertiveness and gender egalitarianism, humane orientation and performance orientation (Carl et al., 2004) or well-being/survival and secular-rational/traditional authority among others (Minkov, 2009). This review of three Italian cultural dimensions highlights the importance of reviewing fundamental cultural values in an attempt to produce positive leadership changes.

Global cultural, social, economic and political trends surely are influencing and reshaping the context of Italian and Italian-American leadership. The centrifugal and centripetal forces of globalization, along with the rapid changes in economic, political, technological and other socio-cultural factors characterize the new waves of Italian globalization. The Italian reality is much more complex than the cultural stereotypes of pizza and mafia, in the same way that the actuality of Italian leadership surely goes beyond “monopolistic” or “protagonist” leadership styles that, in the case of Berlusconi, is defined by Giovanni Sartori as a *sultanato* (sultanate) (Sartori, 2009).

This study has attempted to preset the cultural contexts of Italian leadership within the cultural specific dynamics of power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. The cultural and historical approach of this study presents, however, various limits that could be overcome through a more comprehensive analysis of contemporary Italian leadership practices in comparison with values and perceptions across cultures. The large-scale Hofstede and GLOBE studies are difficult to replicate. However, an examination of the

cultural values characterizing contemporary Italian leaders could be highly beneficial if analyzed through a cross-cultural comparison. They can greatly benefit and improve Italian economic, political, cultural and institutional relations in our increasingly globalizing societies.

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