"WEIRD" Psychology and Christian Leadership

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Abstract

The great variation between cultures makes it unlikely that 'one size fits all' when stipulating the qualities required of Christian leaders, including missionaries. Some attempts to define the character traits and skills needed by movement catalysts or other types of leaders have been based on psychological criteria formulated in Western cultures that may not be appropriate for non-Western cultures. Instead of using secular psychological criteria, it is better to use the qualities and lifestyle characteristics advocated in the New Testament.

Key Words: Christian leadership, culture, psychology, WEIRD societies

Leadership Traits and Cultural Variation: Does "One Size Fit All"?

Just as the Holy Spirit was the one who gave King David the plans for the temple (1 Chronicles 28:12), who endowed Samson with supernatural strength (Judges 14:19), and who spoke through the prophets (1 Peter 1:10-11), the real leader behind any work of God today is the Holy Spirit. This obvious fact is too often overlooked by those who seek to devise strategies for mission based on human principles of leadership, education, or communication. Even though these human insights are often helpful to some extent, there is a danger of attaching so much importance to a particular "method" that the key role of the Holy Spirit gets pushed out.

Contrasting with our human tendency to rely on our own abilities and to do things "our" way, God often chooses those who appear to lack the "right" qualities in the eyes of human society—those considered to be foolish, weak, or lowly (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). The same God was acting by the same principle when he chose leaders for Israel: in Ehud, God chose to use left-handedness; in Deborah he used a woman; Gideon was called while he was keeping out of sight of the Midianites—not an example of boldness—and was at times indecisive (Judges 6:11, 36-40; 7:9-15), but his trust in God meant that he became an example of courage and faith. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and was driven out of his family (Judges 11:1-3), and Samson had a weakness for women—but God used these people for his purposes despite their being apparently "unsuitable" (in human terms). God's choice to use these apparently "unfit" leaders took place during the period before the Israelites chose to emulate the model of leadership prevalent among the nations around them.

Therefore, a question posed in a recent article about "Traits and Competencies of Movement Catalysts" (Daniels and Prinz 2023) seems weird. The authors, Gene Daniels and Emanuel Prinz, think it is necessary "to know the qualities, traits, and competencies that characterize effective pioneers who take the kingdom where it is not yet realized" (33), and they consider the current lack of consensus about such a list to be a problem (36). Implicit in such ways of thinking is an assumption that "one size fits all"—as if there should be a single stereotype applicable to every culture or sub-culture. However, is it reasonable to expect that the same traits that are appropriate for a Muslim context are also the best ones in a Hindu context? Even among Muslim communities there are considerable cultural differences, for example between the Hausa of Nigeria and the Hui of China. A range of cultural gradations from West Africa to Southeast Asia might be less obvious to outsiders who lump them together as "Muslims," but local people are aware of the differences. Even within a culture there are numerous sub-cultures—women versus men, younger versus older people, rural

versus urban, those with formal education versus the unschooled, and so on. Qualities (or "traits and competencies") more suited for ministry among one segment of society might not be so appropriate elsewhere.

More widely, is it reasonable to expect that the same traits and competencies that are appropriate for working in Afghanistan are also those required for Japan, Mongolia, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, or Venezuela? Just as there are a plethora of different cultures and sub-cultures, so those ministering in each local situation may need to have qualities appropriate for that specific context. Because each human being is unique, so each culture is unique. Therefore it is unlikely that "one size fits all" when it comes to stipulating what "ought" to be the "right" characteristics of movement leaders, missionaries, or other Christian leaders.

At the end of their article, Daniels and Prinz acknowledge the complexity in what they call "the multifarious and mysterious phenomena we call movements," and they express the hope that their article will stimulate more "study and dialog" (38). In responding to their invitation, my aim is to situate the discussion in a much wider context not only by recognising that different cultures may require different approaches but also by acknowledging that the ultimate movement catalyst is the Holy Spirit, who may choose to use "unexpected" people and "unusual" methods so that the glory goes to God, not human beings.

In their search for a "consensus" among missiologists, Daniels and Prinz cite various published works in English, all authored by people with *Western* names. This linguistic and regional limitation might simply mean that Daniels and Prinz are unaware of literature in other languages, but they might also unwittingly be influenced excessively by assumptions prevalent within so-called "Western" cultures of North America, Europe, and Australasia. One of these assumptions is that studies of leadership based on psychological theories developed in a secular and Western context are applicable universally.

Prinz (2022, 8) admits that the starting point for his earlier research was the findings from secular leadership studies, which had come up with a list of traits that, he claims, leaders "universally have in common" (18). One of the problems with this approach is the issue of whether or not secular leaders in business or politics are appropriate role models for Christian ministers—particularly in the light of Luke 22:25-26, where Jesus commented on the leadership model practised by Gentile kings and declared, "You are not to be like that."

It is likely that many missionaries (not only movement catalysts) would have qualities resembling or even surpassing those of business entrepreneurs. Missionaries are highly motivated, working long hours for low remuneration but being more committed to their jobs than many secular employees, including CEOs. Many missionaries see their "work" not in terms of contracted numbers of hours but as also including time spent in building relationships with people over meals, or time spent in intercession perhaps in the middle of the night or while walking outside. Whereas secular leaders often appear to be motivated by a desire for possessions, power or prestige, missionaries claim to be motivated by the love of God and a love for other people.

"WEIRD" Psychology

A further problem with adopting as normative the findings of secular psychological research on leadership is the fact that most experimental research on human psychology and behaviour has been conducted among respondents from Western societies (Henrich 2020, xii). This limitation applies also to studies of leadership traits. For example, Rovelli and Curnis (2021) note that most studies of narcissistic leadership have focussed on American firms; theirs is an exception because they studied Italian CEOs—but Italy is also a Western society. Noting this

limitation is not to say that studies of narcissistic leadership are therefore irrelevant to non-Westerners. At least in this instance, the research may potentially shed light on some of the negative behaviour of some movement catalysts, such as aggressiveness or over-assertiveness, which Daniels and Prinz (2023, 37) mention as characteristics noted by other authors. Narcissistic leaders with an inflated ego can be aggressive and bully their employees (Gauglitz et al., 2023)—a salutary warning for Christian ministries to appoint leaders with clear Christ-like humility.

Even so, Western societies are culturally and psychologically anomalous when compared with most other societies around the globe, both now and in the past (Henrich 2020). Individualism is characteristic of "WEIRD" (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies that assign importance to personal traits and competencies (Henrich 2020, 28). Moreover, "the immense importance assigned by the discipline of psychology to notions of self-esteem and positive self-views is probably a WEIRD phenomenon," as is "a tendency to see people's behavior as anchored in personal traits that influence their actions" (Henrich 2020, 33). In other words, stipulating that missionaries or movement catalysts operating in non-Western cultures should have psychological traits deemed to be important by Western psychologists runs the risk, albeit unintentionally, of becoming ethnocentric or neo-colonial. No doubt all involved in mentoring mission leaders agree that the aim is not to make others into our own image but rather to enable them to flourish according to the image of God that is already in them.

The value accorded to individualism in WEIRD societies might be one reason why Western leadership studies have focussed so much on the traits and competencies of individual leaders (or movement catalysts in the studies by Emanuel Prinz) rather than the dynamics of a leadership team. In practice, groups of people collectively enable an organization or movement to function. It is an advantage for team members to have different giftings (i.e., traits or competencies) to fulfil a variety of complementary roles. In a church planting movement with which I am familiar (Lewis 2022), the leaders have quite different personalities and giftings: it is this variety that imparts strength and flexibility to the whole. The New Testament refers to group leadership by "apostles and elders" (Acts 15:2, 4, 22-23), which may be closer to "polycentric" leadership (Handley 2022) involving collaboration (Handley 2023): such collaborative and shared leadership is less "WEIRD" than an individualistic focus on the person of the catalyst. Moreover, the term "elder" implies a respect for maturity and experience that is more characteristic of Asian and African traditional cultures than WEIRD ones.

Problems in Cross-Cultural Research

Trying to use WEIRD theories and methodologies derived from WEIRD cultural contexts when conducting research among non-WEIRD societies can open up a theoretical and methodological can of worms. One issue is the extent to which respondents themselves are influenced, directly or indirectly, by the thought processes common among WEIRD societies. For example, literacy—a fruit of formal education—produces various changes to the structure of the brain which means that literate people are poorer at facial recognition than oral learners (Henrich 2020, 3-4). However, most psychological research is among literate people who can fill in questionnaires and have received some degree of formal education. As the educational systems of most countries are dominated by curricula derived from WEIRD cultures, the more educated members of such non-WEIRD societies begin to behave more like WEIRD people.

With reference to movement catalysts, Prinz (2022, 44-45) acknowledges that 61% of his sample of 31 people whose psychological profiles he studied were from Western countries: 17 from the USA, plus one each from Australia and New Zealand. Hence it is not surprising that those in his sample show similarities with secular leaders from Western cultures. The predominance of Westerners in his sample might reflect the now somewhat outdated criteria by which Prinz (2022, 10) defined the "outside change agent" as someone from outside the culture. Moreover, the absence of Koreans is striking; Chinese are also absent. The seven participants from Indonesia and five from sub-Saharan African countries were presumably literate in English to participate in this study. They are comparable with the undergraduates in Nairobi whose psychological profiles were similar to people of WEIRD backgrounds elsewhere in the world, because the educational system had exposed them to WEIRD values and ways of thinking, as contrasted with labourers in Nairobi whose non-WEIRD psychological profiles were much more characteristic of the majority of cultures around the world (Henrich 2020, 25).

Because people from WEIRD backgrounds tend to overestimate their own valued talents, seek to make themselves look good, and love to make their own choices (Henrich 2020, 55), it is possible that such factors might have inflated some of the positive self-assessments reported to Prinz. Social desirability bias is a potential problem in many sociological and psychological surveys (Brace and Bolton 2022, 290-304): Christians are not exempt from such bias and may even be more prone to it if they are known to the researcher as Christian leaders. The questions asked by Prinz (2022, 120-176) show no evidence of being phrased in a way that might reduce social desirability bias. In view of the preponderance of WEIRD background respondents in his sample, resemblances with other Westerners from WEIRD cultures are highly likely to occur.

Henrich (2022, 31) notes that "global psychological variation is both continuous and multidimensional" rather than being a simple dichotomy of WEIRD versus non-WEIRD. Therefore there can be cultural bias from *any* culture—but this is especially relevant if there is an excessive number of people from any one culture in a multi-cultural sample. This was the case for a different survey in which 57% of the respondents (85 out of 147) "came from Victor John's network" in northern India (Prinz and Goldhor 2022a, 13), referring to a movement among speakers of the Bhojpuri language (John 2019). Therefore all their responses were referring to the same context—both external factors in the society and internal factors within the same movement. As Bhojpuri speakers, they were not responding to the questions in their "heart language" but presumably in Hindi; however, the presence of any interpreter further raises the possibility of social desirability bias. It is unlikely that a substantial group of people from the same social context would not have discussed the research and their answers among themselves. If there were convergence among their answers on account of mutual influence between respondents, it would invalidate all of the conclusions drawn by Prinz and Goldhor.

Prinz and Goldhor (2022a, 12) state that their survey was available in "Spanish, French, Swahili, Hindi, and Indonesian," implying that the primary local religious contexts varied from Islam and Hinduism to Roman Catholicism. It also shows a diversity of cultures and implies again an assumption that "one size fits all" without taking into account local cultural factors. Having a questionnaire available in several languages is in principle laudable but also opens up a linguistic minefield. Terms for visible, material entities are more likely to refer to the same concept in different languages, but as the referents become more abstract semantic fields become less directly comparable. Even the terms for colours in different languages focus on different segments of the electromagnetic spectrum (Kay 2011; Hardin and Maffi

1997), with some languages having only a few colour terms. For more abstract concepts, including personality characteristics, semantic fields become much more diffuse. Within any one language, the same character trait or behavioural pattern might be described by a variety of terms, but when translating such terms across different languages and cultures there is considerable scope for nuances becoming lost in translation. For example, in English words such as "resolute," "determined," "focussed," "obstinate," or "pig-headed" might be referring to the same perceived behaviour, but the choice of vocabulary reflects the speaker's evaluation of the trait rather than actual differences in conduct. The problem is compounded especially when translating between language families as different and unrelated to one another as Swahili, Hindi, and Indonesian. Hence a survey about psychological traits, when translated into multiple languages, might not be comparing like with like.

Biblical ("Non-WEIRD") Criteria for Leadership

Questionnaires are an imprecise tool when asking about inner states, attitudes, or ways of thinking. If the answers are then pigeon-holed into abstract categories such as "drive to achieve" or "internal locus of control," as was done by Prinz and Goldhor (2022b, 38-39), the analysis becomes even more remote from the realities of actual behaviour. By contrast, the New Testament criteria for Christian leaders set out in the pastoral epistles focus much more on real-life behaviour and lifestyles rather than abstract categories or self-assessments.

As Biblical criteria for Christian leadership are markedly different from characteristics advocated by secular writers on leadership, the criteria listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9 bear little resemblance to Prinz's lists of traits or competencies. Qualities such as being "self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined" (Titus 1:8, NIV) could be regarded as character traits, whereas other criteria, such as being spiritually mature (1 Timothy 3:6) or "hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:2-3, NIV), are characteristics that can be observed by others and to some extent are amenable to testing: one can count the quantity of alcohol consumed or the number of bruises on a wife's face! Drunkenness, love of money, and "pursuing dishonest gain" (Titus 1:7, NIV) are observable behaviour patterns that indicate spiritual malaise. They reveal something of the person's values and might even be markers of a misplaced dependency—a seeking of "comfort" from alcohol or possessions rather than seeking after God himself. Not only the leader's character but also the person's *lifestyle* are very important factors (Lewis 2013, 261).

A person's conduct at home in relating both to his or her spouse and to any children is an acid test for suitability as a leader in the family of God: "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:5, NIV). A male Christian leader should be "the husband of but one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6, NIV): this could refer not only to having multiple wives at one time but also include what anthropologists call "serial polygyny"—that is, marrying again after divorce or widowhood. This stipulation is in accord with the teachings of Jesus against divorce (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Divorce is usually the culmination of a process in which both parties are responsible for their own choices and the consequences of their own behaviour. If a person is willing to break the solemn commitments entered into at marriage, how will he or she respond to other situations of conflict or stress? Does it indicate problems in the person's willingness to forgive or seek reconciliation? As children are affected by the atmosphere in the home, their respect for a parent can also in some cases become a barometer of that parent's character.

Family members know a person's character through personal experience, and the same applies to some extent to guests within the home: actions speak louder than words. Lifestyle qualities including hospitality, a simpler, less materialistic lifestyle, and a high respect for the stability of marriage and family life are relatively weak in "WEIRD" societies as compared with many traditional cultures elsewhere in the world. However, these behaviour patterns and associated values often speak louder than words in cross-cultural contexts and may be more relevant for missionaries than psychological traits such as an "internal locus of control."

Reliance on human (albeit God-created) traits and competencies may be a hindrance, not an asset. It leads to pride and doing things in one's own strength rather than humility and relying on God's resources. Spiritual leaders in the Bible had to learn to depend on God rather than their own traits and competencies. Abraham had to learn not to try to manipulate God's promise of a son and to wait until Sarah's pregnancy was clearly a supernatural gift of grace. Moses learned to liberate the people by God's miraculous power rather than by human methods (murdering the Egyptian). David often sought God's guidance; Solomon recognised his need for wisdom, which comes from God. Joseph and Daniel both rose to leadership positions because of their spirituality, including the interpretation of dreams by insights that came not from human reasoning but from the Spirit of God. Although it was the Holy Spirit who empowered Samson, guided David, and gave wisdom, dream interpretation or prophetic revelations to many others, the Holy Spirit is often in the background because listening to his voice requires humility. Those who promote themselves as "leaders" on the basis of their own human character traits, or their training in "leadership" according to human standards, risk replacing the role of the Holy Spirit with their own human traits and competencies. Seeking glory for oneself is tantamount to making oneself into an idol.

By contrast, being filled with the Holy Spirit is one of the criteria for leadership in the New Testament (Acts 6:3, 5: 11:24). Part of what that criterion entails is listening to God and discerning his will. This is a skill that can develop over time if we are seeking God, but it cannot easily be assessed by survey questions that might try to measure broad categories such as "hunger for God." Prinz is right that the character of the person is important, but his categories are too superficial. Samuel had to learn that the external traits and competencies of seven of Jesse's sons were not the ones that God desired: rather, God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:6-13). To be a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14) is certainly linked with spirituality of some kind but is also related to purity of heart. A key quality of such people is holiness, which is listed by the Apostle Paul as a criterion for Christian leadership (Titus 1:8). If Psalm 15:2-5 can be regarded as listing some characteristics of holiness, then it includes not only having a blameless walk and speaking the truth from one's heart but also keeping promises even when it hurts, and not lending money at interest—qualities that demand some measure of sacrifice. Living a holy life in humility facilitates sensitivity to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

A Concluding Hope

My hope is that this response to their invitation to dialogue will encourage Daniels and Prinz, along with others trying to discern mission leaders' qualities, to investigate further not only the variety of teachable and humble people recruited onto the Holy Spirit's team but also the ways in which such people learn to minister effectively in a range of cultural contexts.

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