Stress perceptions and leadership orientation of Malaysians: Exploring their similarities and differences with Americans

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Abstract: To explore the management orientation of employees in Malaysia and the United States, this paper focuses on comparing the leadership and stress perception of respondents in these two different countries. It appears that Malaysians and Americans have a significantly higher score on the relationship-orientation than task-orientation. Similarly, the female respondents in Malaysia had a significantly higher score on the relationship orientation. Finally, the responses of these 216 Malaysian respondents were compared with the 87 Americans, demonstrating significantly higher scores for respondents from the U.S. on both orientations. For management and practical application, suggestions and implications for future studies are presented.

Key words: relationship; task; stress perceptions; culture; values; Malaysia and the United States

1. Introduction

In the competitive world of global business in today's workplace, understanding behaviors of employees and their relationship orientation are paramount to succeeding as employees, managers, and entrepreneurs. It is important for managers and expatriates to reflect on their relationships with people of different cultures and examine how differences in context can lead to cultural misunderstanding for overseas employees living or working in Malaysia or the United States. The purpose is to analyze the relationship similarities and dissimilarities between American and Malaysian respondents.

For international managers and researchers, it is essential to understand the culture of the country or region in which it is doing business (Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009; Mujtaba, 2008). It is almost impossible for a manager or a company to be successful in a foreign country without knowledge and understanding of the culture. Managers of international operations should be aware of the importance of context in various countries. Mujtaba (2009) explains that context indicates the level in which communication occurs outside of verbal discussion. Understanding the effect of the differences in context provides a knowledge base and cultural intelligence that can help provide not only strong teams but more over effective business relationships with a firm's vendors and customers (Hall, 1976; Hall, 1998). Watkins and LIU (1996) assert that the quality of social interactions between individuals in a collectivist culture depends heavily on whether or not they belong to the same in-group. Members of collectivist cultures are relatively ineffective with strangers, commonly use avoidance relationships and behaviors, and compete with, manipulate, and exploit out-groups more extensively than those of individualistic

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cultures. Surprisingly, Malaysia generally has had high scores on trust and customer orientation than other Asian nations (Huff & Kelley, 2005). One possible explanation is that Malaysian society is more heterogeneous than other Asian nations because Malaysians have had a greater need to work together with other ethnic groups.

Malaysia is a high-context culture and the U.S. is a low-context culture. It will be interesting to see the general tendencies of Malaysians and Americans and to find out whether they are similar or different in their leadership orientations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Malaysia and the United States

Malaysia is a federation that consists of thirteen states and three federal territories in Southeast Asia with a total landmass of 329,847 square kilometers (127,355 sq mi). Malaysia is a multi-cultural country and has approximately 27 million people in 2008, with three main ethnic groups consisting of 62% Bumiputeras (including Malays), 24% Chinese, 8% Indians, with other minorities and indigenous peoples (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2009). It has a mixture of languages (Bahasa Malaysia is the official language with various Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Mandarin and Tamil specifically by Indian and English as the scientific language are widely spoken) and numerous religions being practiced (Islam, Buddhist, Taoism, Hinduism, Christianity, etc). In recent years Malaysia has been facing some very large changes: politically, economically, socially, and technologically.

The behavior of Malaysians and Americans reflect their native cultures. To other cultures, especially in Asian countries, Americans from the United States can be perceived as selfish or arrogant due to their individualistic styles. Young American children are taught to be creative and innovative by thinking of their own ideas. As competition is extremely prevalent in the American culture and rewards are given to the ones who succeed, children are also taught that to become a leader and to get rewarded, they should stand out and express their own opinions. Being rebellious and going against the majority can be considered positive for the American society as it is one sign of critical thinking and individualism (Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009). Another way that American children are encouraged to show their individualistic behavior is through the choices in their dress code while attending school—In most cases, they can choose their own colors and styles.

As emphasized by Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaar (1993), culture plays an important role in the behavior of its people. Adler (1986) argued that national culture has a greater impact on employees than does their organization's culture. Thus, management must concern itself more with developing appropriate management methods relevant to the national culture than with optimizing organizational culture. Malaysian culture differs from American culture in many ways. However, Malaysians as well as Americans, enjoy great levels of freedom and pragmatism as both groups of people are flexible and open-minded toward new ideas, creativity and innovations. As can be witnessed, Malaysians have adopted many western practices, such as modern technology usage and higher education fields, perhaps due to the constant evolution of culture and widespread availability of information over the cyberspace highways. Similarly, in search of better teamwork, Americans have adopted many eastern or Asian practices as to encourage employees to work more collectively to achieve the organization's goals. In essence, modern practices and focus on competitiveness have induced changes in both cultures.

Hofstede's (1997) study on 50 countries found Malaysia to score the highest on his Power Distance Index. This indicates a very strong emphasis on hierarchy. Asian collectivism is more akin to vertical collectivism.

Thomas and Au (1999) explain vertical collectivism as a form of collectivism where individuals see themselves as a part of an in-group where there are differences in status. Inequality, hierarchical distinctions, and pressure to conform are the norms in such a group. Individuals would be expected to exhibit less voice in such a setting. Since Malaysia is high on power distance as a culture, hierarchy and inequality between managers and employees would be expected and this is the case with most collectivistic societies.

The concepts of Buddhism and Islam, which are the most practiced religions in Malaysia, play a very important role in sharing the Malaysian culture. They provide norms and expectations pertaining to reciprocity. These qualities, norms and expectations interact together in a symbolic way to produce a certain type of person who receives approval from others. Such a person is typified by refinement, politeness and consideration of others (Dahlan, 1991).

In Malaysia meaning is often more explicit and less direct than in many western cultures. This means that words are less important and greater attention must be given to additional forms of communication such as voice tone, body language, eye-contact, and facial expressions. In Malaysia, because business is personal and based on trust, developing relationships rather than exchanging facts and information is the main objective of communication. This also relates to the Malaysian cultural values of courtesy, tolerance, harmony, and saving face. Direct answers, particularly negative ones, are avoided in order to prevent disagreement and preserve harmony, two very important aspects of Malaysian culture. For the Malay and the Chinese (over 80% of the population) it is more important to focus on the social and relational aspects of the business transaction rather than simply on the facts of the business. Values such as mutuality and reciprocity point to a negotiation style which veers towards a win-win outcome (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

Malaysians' respect for authority is evident in most business dealings. The relationship between subordinates and their superiors for example is distinct and highly official. Malaysians do not address their bosses by their first name, but use titles such as "Mr." and "Madam" followed by their honorific form of address. Relationships between Malaysian business colleagues are based on mutual respect and, as such, the same procedure used when addressing their superiors is also applied with their Malaysian business colleagues (Doing business in Malaysia, 2007).

According to Storz (1999) both the Chinese and the Malay view the experience of time as a subjective and holistic notion, this implies that any time related concept, for example, punctuality and deadlines cannot be absolute. "Rubber time" is a common term used by Malaysians to describe their practice of punctuality. It suggests that time is changeable and stretchable and deadlines can be moveable and not immutable.

It is clear that Americans have an individualistic character and, as a result, employees tend to work alone. In the Malaysian culture the group is the primary unit of social organization as a consequence of their living in extended families, perhaps more so among the Chinese populations; Thus, this explains why it is easier for them to work cohesively as teams and groups.

In regard to women's role in Malaysian society, it can be stated that in recent years, women have become the keen competitors in the capitalistic free economy of Malaysia. More and more corporations and businesses have been formed by women, which led to strengthen their economic position in the society (Ariffin, 1999). Even the government in its national policy on women, has agreed to train more women to become entrepreneurs. A study by Roziah and Maimunah (2007) indicated that the Malaysian managerial workforce is characterized by men managers that practice a commander style of management and women managers that tend to portray a style of shepherd. In Malaysia the situation of promoting elite professional women to leadership or higher managerial

positions still remains a sensitive issue (Cecilia & Shanthi, 1999). However, with the introduction of education and the changing role that women play, they started to participate in the public domain and progressed into the managerial ranks. The percentage of Malaysian women in the labor force has increased from 44.7 percent in 2000 to 45.7 percent in 2005 and 45.8 in 2006. Their share of total employment increased from 35.6 to 36.7 percent during the same period. Manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, services as well as the agricultural sector are the main working areas which Malaysian women are involved (Ismail & Ibrahim, 2008).

2.2 Task and relationship orientations

Early studies conducted that the behaviour of leaders was perceived primarily in terms of two factors, initiating structure (task-orientation) and consideration (relationship-orientation) (Halpin & Winer, 1957; Fleishman, 1967). Bass (1990) found relation-oriented functions to be associated with subordinate satisfaction and task-oriented functions to be associated with group performance. However, Bass also found relations functions to be positively associated with group performance. According to Sherwood and DePaolo (2005), the task context includes situations that involve how the manager will accomplish tasks through people and in which attention is given by both the worker and manager to the task at hand. These situations may involve planning, task coordination and execution. Since the task-based context focuses on the work to be done, skills and abilities are the predominant criteria on which workers base their willingness to be vulnerable. Abilities are a clear requirement for accomplishing tasks in a specific domain (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). The relationship context includes situations that involve showing concern for the worker or providing support for the worker and the worker-manager relationship. This context may include open lines of communication, discussion of personal concerns and providing socio-emotional support.

Higgins and Endler (1995) grouped coping strategies with stress into three main classes: task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented. The task-oriented strategy is problem-focused which involves taking direct action to alter the situation itself and to reduce the amount of stress it evokes. In the emotion-oriented strategy, efforts are directed at altering emotional responses to stressors. It also includes attempts to reframe the problem in such a way that it no longer evokes a negative emotional response and elicits less stress (Mattlin, 1990). These strategies involve proactive efforts to alter the stressfulness of the situation, with the use of emotion-oriented strategies being favored by people whose personality disposition enables them to easily enter into and sustain a state of emotional arousal in response to, or in anticipation of, emotionally-laden events (Melamed, 1994). Furthermore, task-oriented and emotion-oriented strategies are associated with better adjustment, as reflected in higher self-rated coping effectiveness and less depression (Causey & Dubow, 1993; Compas, Malcarne & Fondacaro, 1988).

2.3 Stress overload perceptions

Today's working conditions are characterized by employees changing jobs frequently or at least six to seven times during working years, heavy workloads, higher job expectations, less job security, increased skepticism and the continual downsizing efforts of organizations, all of which are serving to cause increased stress in the work place (Barham, Younies & Muhamad, 2009). Stress is anything which the body reacts to or adapts to in a given time period. Stress can be all those feelings and perceptions in lack of time, ability, skill, or resources to effectively deal with personal or professional demands in a given time. Stress is all those real and perceived forces that encroach or are imposed on the individual. Hans Seyle's (1974) and Hans Seyle's (1956) description of stress is still valid, as stated by Mujtaba and McCartney (2007), in that eustress describes the good or positive things that happen, and distress describes the opposite. There are, inevitably hundreds of definitions for stress that can be

found in the literature. The most common may be that stress is a response of the body to demands made upon it. Matteson and Ivancivich (1987, p. 216) defined stress as an adaptive response that moderated by differences in each person. Stress can be the consequence of any action, situation, or event that places undue demands or hardships upon an individual. It would appear that the most popular accepted concept of stress is that there is a stressor(s) (which can be anything) that triggers off or has a response to (stress) either eustress or distress. Based on a study by Teratanvat and Kleiner (2001), stress in small businesses arises from five major sources: task overload, uncertainty of what will happen, understaffing, lack of sufficient experience for the job, and personal problems.

In any given situation, a person's level of stress can be ranked as low, moderate, high, and severe. Those at the high end of the continuum who are consistently experiencing high and severe levels of stress can easily become sick and unproductive. Some of the negative economic implications of stress are poor quality of work, low productivity, absenteeism, high turnover, etc. (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994; Edworthy, 2000). Davidson and Cooper (1994) suggest that female managers are often confronted with additional pressures from both their home and job environments as compared to their male counterparts. Society tends to still expect female professionals to also take care of household chores as is traditionally expected of full-time housewives.

Therefore, these individuals should take proper steps to eliminate or reduce the sources of such extreme levels of stress. Stress can often be caused by taking on too many projects or tasks at work or at home. Sometimes people take on more projects than they can handle on voluntarily basis and, at other times, it is delegated by one's superiors or colleagues. In either case, one should be very careful and understand that consistently overloading oneself can be problematic. According to Hyde and Allen (2006), stress overload can be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative overload is when a person is given tasks and responsibilities beyond his or her existing abilities without adequate training or skill building to get it done effectively. If a basketball player is asked to have a boxing match with a skilled boxer, then he or she is likely to experience qualitative overload. Similarly, most high school students taking advanced calculus courses are likely to encounter qualitative overload. Quantitative overload is when you are asked to take on additional responsibilities, but you do not have enough time to get them done in the way you prefer. According to Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn and Snoek (1964), role overload is the conflict of priorities resulting from expectations that a person performs a wide variety of tasks which are impossible to complete within the given time limits. Role conflict is psychological conflict experienced by an individual as a result of conflicting pressures exerted by role senders.

Having many assignments and excess workload with school and a fulltime job and family responsibilities is an example of overload which can cause stress and tension. Hyde and Allen (2006) state that overload stressors can produce psychological, physiological and behavioral changes.

Specific behaviors also contribute, either positively or negatively, to one's health such as regular exercise and healthy diet or smoking and drinking alcoholic beverages. The environment or location also has effects on people's health and their level of stress. For example, a study by Harrison (1995) which examined the satisfaction and tension of Singaporean and Australian managers, as representative of East Asian and Anglo-American clusters of nations, showed that middle-level managers in Singapore experience greater job-related tension and stress than do their Australian equivalents.

In addition, a person's personality has a significant impact on personal health since self-esteem and emotional stability impact how one feels physiologically which can have an affect physically. The feelings of work stress also differ among believers based on their level of religious commitment. Barham, et al (2009)

mentioned a basic Islamic behavior which is related directly to the feelings and coping with work stress. It is the principle of Al-Taqua which is presented practically in many ways, such as, sacrificing the individual time, effort, money, struggle, and facing difficulties to gain acceptance. From an Islamic perspective, performing any job to seek God's acceptance is considered worship. Thus, the faith and belief in God will produce greater acceptance, tolerance, willingness and sacrifices to carry out a job. The believer will accept long working hours, poor conditions, role problems, miscommunication, and even less money if she/he believes that performing the job will lead to receiving God's acceptance (Barham, et al., 2009).

While there are many variables that impact a person's level of stress that can lead to physiological or psychological health problems, this study is designed to assess whether Malaysians, who are high-context, report low, moderate, high, or severe levels of stress associated with task overload.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Americans have adopted many eastern or Asian practices as to encourage employees to work more collectively toward organizational goals. In essence, modern practices and focus on competitiveness have induced changes in both collectivistic (high-context) and individualist (low-context) cultures. Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaar (1993) have said that culture plays an important role in the behavior of people. Furthermore, Adler (1986) mentioned that national culture has a greater impact on employees than does their organization's culture. The literature has emphasized that the Malaysian culture differs from American culture in many ways since they are high-context and collectivistic as well as low-context and individualistic respectively. However, Malaysians have adopted some western practices perhaps due to the constant evolution of culture and widespread availability of information over the cyberspace highways. Since Malaysians have a high score on the Power Distance Index, it means that they have a very strong emphasis on hierarchy which is in alignment with high-context and collective orientations. Asian collectivism is more akin to vertical collectivism (Thomas & Au, 1999). So this study explores cultural contexts (such as collectivism, individualism) along with leadership dimensions and stress orientation based on the responses of Malaysian and American respondents. People often assume that people of collective cultures are not highly stressed since they do not always emphasize tasks. As such, more research is needed to determine whether this assumption is true or false in the high-context and collective culture of Malaysians.

The results of previous research show that leadership has been recognized as a determinant of role stress (Babin & Boles, 1996; Michaels, Day & Joachimsthaler, 1987). The role of leadership, whether formal or informal, can increase one's obligations for each situation. Situational leadership theory states a best leadership style depending on the situational variables surrounding each decision, person, and strategy. One dimension of each person's leadership style is to the extent to which he or she is people-oriented or task-oriented. Most people fall somewhere in between the two extremes. However, since cultures influence people through years of socialization and the two countries studied in this study are from different cultural contexts (high and low), this study will help in determining whether people of high-context culture are more relationship-oriented or more task-oriented. Furthermore, this study will determine whether people of a low-context culture are more relationship-oriented or more task-oriented. Finally, it has been said that since Americans many work hours on their jobs, they are considered to be more task-oriented (Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009). High task orientation tends to cause more stress. However, people in Malaysia also work plenty of hours but they are more family-oriented. This study will test the perceptual severity of people from a high-context culture being stressed. It assesses whether high-context culture Malaysians report low, moderate, high, or severe levels of stress associated with task overload.

3. Study methodology: Task, relationship and stress orientations

Task and relationship orientations are important aspects of leadership and effective coaching (Mujtaba, 2008; Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009). As emphasized by Hersey (1984), Hersey (1997), Hersey (2008) and Mujtaba (2008), leadership is the process of influencing an individual or a group of individuals while providing an environment where personal, professional, and/or organizational objectives can be successfully achieved. Leaders tend to use various amounts of task or relationship behaviors. Generally speaking, task behavior is the extent to which leaders engage in top-down communication by explaining what the follower is to do, as well as when, where, and how each function is to be accomplished, and relationship behavior is the extent to which leaders engage in joint communication with followers while providing socio-emotional support. Peter G. Northouse (2007) provides a useful instrument, known as style questionnaire, which can be used to obtain a general profile of a person's leadership behaviors regarding task and relationship orientations. The style questionnaire can be completed by oneself as well as one's friends, peers, bosses, and/or employees for comparison purposes (Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009). The results can show one's use of various task and relationship behaviors. The SPSS (16.0 version) output for the reliability data has shown that the cronbach's alpha is 0.888, which means that questions are good for classroom tests and they are acceptable in social science research.

To determine one's personal leadership characteristics, the person circles one of the options that best describe how he or she sees himself or herself (or the person that is being evaluated) regarding each statement. For each statement, the person indicates the degree to which he or she (or the person being evaluated) engages in the stated behavior. A rating of 1 means "Never" and a rating of 5 means "Always" with the person demonstrating the specific behavior. To determine one's scores for the leadership styles questionnaire, one can add the responses for the odd numbered items to determine the score for task-orientation behaviors, and add the responses for the even numbered items to determine the score for relationship-orientation behaviors. The scoring interpretation for the style questionnaire by Northouse (2007, p. 87) is presented in Table 1.

Table 1　Task and relationship score interpretations

Scores	Descriptions
45-50	Very high range
40-44	High range
35-39	Moderately high range
30-34	Moderately low range
25-29	Low range
10-24	Very low range

High task behavior scores tend to mean that the leader engages in more top-down communication by explaining what the follower is to do, as well as when, where, and how each function is to be accomplished. High relationship behavior scores mean the leader engages in more joint communication with followers while providing socio-emotional support. Of course, the degree to which one engages in more task or relationship oriented behaviors should depend on the variables present in the situation; Some of the situational variables can include the difficulty of the task, the importance of the job, the time available to get it done, and the readiness of the follower to successfully complete the task without much input. Effective leaders stay in control by managing through a balance of both task and relationship oriented behaviors, as appropriate, to make sure the objectives and

goals are accomplished.

The overload stress inventory, adapted from Hyde and Allen's conceptual analysis of overload (2006, pp. 29-30), can be used to assess the stress perception of respondents. This study used the overload stress inventory to assess how Malaysian males and females see their level of overload stress. This inventory has ten statements, and for each statement the respondent indicates the degree to which he or she (or the person being evaluated) engages in the stated behavior. A rating of 1 means "Never" and a rating of 5 means "Always" with the person demonstrating the specific behavior. The responses are assessed according to the following general criteria (Hyde & Allen, 2006):

- Scores in the range of 40-50 tend to mean severe stress from overload.
- Scores in the range of 30-39 tend to mean high stress from overload.
- Scores in the range of 20-29 tend to mean moderate stress from overload.
- Scores in the range of 19 and below tend to mean low stress from overload.

For data collection, the first author went to the university, Universiti Sians Malaysia (USM), and distributed the questionnaires among students in different classes and inside the library. USM is located in the city of Penang. In Penang the majority of population happens to be of the Chinese background. It is the only part of Malaysia with such population distribution. The greater metropolitan area of Penang consists of urbanized Penang Island, Seberang Prai, Sungai Petani, Kulim and the surrounding areas. In terms of population, it is the second largest metropolitan area in Malaysia after the Conurbation of Kuala Lumpur (Klang Valley). According to *National Census 2009*, the population of this urban area is about 1.8 million.

The state has the highest population density in Malaysia with 2,457.33 people per square kilometre on the island and 1,055.77 people per square kilometre on the mainland. It is also the only non-Malay dominated state in Malaysia. Penang is the only state in Malaysia where ethnic Chinese forms a plurality. The ethnic composition in 2008 was:

- Ethnic Chinese: 635,000 (41.8%)
- Malay: 613,800 (40.5%)
- Ethnic Indian: 158,000 (10.4%)
- Others
  - Bumiputra—Other than Malay: 6,200 (0.4%)
  - Other races: 6,400 (0.4%)
  - Non-Malaysian citizens: 98,600 (6.5%)

Penang state is today the third-largest economy amongst the states of Malaysia, after Selangor and Johor. Manufacturing is the most important component of the Penang economy, contributing 45.9% of the state's GDP (2000). The southern part of the island is highly industrialized with high-tech electronics plants (such as Dell, Intel, AMD, Altera, Motorola, Agilent, Hitachi, Osram, Plexus, Bosch and Seagate) located within the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone. In January, 2005, Penang was formally accorded the Multimedia Super Corridor Cyber City status, the first outside of Cyberjaya, with the aim of becoming a high-technology industrial park that conducts cutting-edge research.

The survey forms were given to the respondents and collected back upon completion. A total of 348 questionnaires were distributed evenly among males and females over a two-week period, and totally 216 were acceptable questionnaires were collected. The data were entered an Excel file for analysis. Since the students speak fluent English, none of respondents had any difficulties in understanding any of the questions' meaning.

4. Research questions and hypotheses

The research question for this study was to determine whether Malaysian have a higher average score on the relationship orientation or task orientation. The study also wanted to see if Malaysians report a high or moderate level of stress. Another aspect of this study was to determine whether high-context culture Malaysian have a higher or lower average scores on the relationship orientation or task orientation when compared with their low-context culture American counterparts. The specific hypotheses for this study are as follows:

• Null hypothesis 1: Malaysian respondents will have similar scores for relationship orientations and task orientations.

• Null hypothesis 2: Malaysian male and female respondents will have similar scores on task orientations.

• Null hypothesis 3: Malaysian male and female respondents will have similar scores on relationship orientations.

• Null hypothesis 4: Malaysian respondents will have similar scores on task orientation as the respondents from the United States.

• Null hypothesis 5: Malaysian respondents will have similar scores on relationship orientation as the respondents from the United States.

• Null hypothesis 6: Malaysians will report a moderate level of work overload stress.

• Null hypothesis 7: Malaysian male and female respondents will have similar scores for work overload stress.

For the purpose of this study, a convenience population was sampled and 216 completed questionnaires from Malaysian employees were collected for analysis. The questionnaires were distributed in Penang state which is located in the north west of Malaysia. In the United States, a copy of the survey was given as a part of an exercise for different management courses in South Florida to 88 working adult students and all scores were recorded for the study.

5. Task, relationship and stress perception results

While the average scores of Malaysian respondents for task orientation falls in "moderately high range," and their relationship orientation average also falls in "moderately high range", there are statistically significant differences among them. On the other hand, the average scores of American respondents for task orientation falls in the "high range" and their relationship orientation score also falls in the "high range."

Table 2   Orientation scores of Malaysian and U.S. respondents

Respondents	No.	Gender		Average task orientation score	Average relationship orientation score
		Male	Female		
Malaysia	218	58	158	36.19	38.71
United States	87	56	31	41.18	43.39

As can be seen from Table 3 and using the t-test for differences in two means, at a 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis 1 (Malaysian respondents will have similar scores for relationship orientations and task orientations.) is rejected because the calculated t value (-5.17) does not fall within the critical value of t for statistical significance; In other words, since the t value does fall within the critical values ($+1.97$ and -1.97), the alternative hypothesis is supported. Furthermore, since the p-value is smaller than alpha (α) = 0.05, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Based on the results, the task orientation and relationship orientation scores of Malaysian respondents do not appear to be similar. As such, one can conclude that the Malaysian respondents have significantly different scores on the task and relationship orientations. Perhaps because of their high-context and collective culture, Malaysian respondents seem to be putting more emphasis on relationships than tasks.

Table 3   Malaysian task vs. relationship orientations

Task orientation	
Sample size	216
Sample mean	36.19
Sample standard deviation	5.15
Relationship orientation	
Sample size	216
Sample mean	38.71
Sample standard deviation	4.98
Intermediate calculations	
Population 1 sample degrees of freedom	215
Population 2 sample degrees of freedom	215
Total degrees of freedom	430
Pooled variance	25.66
Difference in sample means	－2.52
Two-tailed test	
t-test statistic	－5.17
Lower critical value	－1.965
Upper critical value	1.965
p-value	4E-07

As can be seen from Table 4, the null hypothesis 2 (Malaysian male and female respondents will have similar scores on task orientations.) cannot be rejected because the calculated t of 0.98 is within the critical value of t for statistical significance (+1.97 and －1.97) and the p-value (0.33) is larger than alpha (0.05). Based on these results, the task orientation scores of male and female Malaysian respondents appear to be similar. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted.

Table 4   Malaysian males/females—Task

Task orientation—Males	
Sample size	58
Sample mean	36.76
Sample standard deviation	4.72
Task orientation—Females	
Sample size	158.00
Sample mean	35.98
Sample standard deviation	5.31
Two-tailed test	
t-test statistic	0.98
p-value	0.33

As can be seen from Table 5, the null hypothesis 3 (Malaysian male and female respondents will have similar scores on relationship orientations) cannot be rejected because the calculated t of -0.38 is within the critical value of t for statistical significance (+1.97 and -1.97) and the p-value (0.70) is larger than alpha (0.05). Based on these results, the relationship orientation scores of male and female Malaysian respondents appear to be similar. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted.

Table 5   Malaysian males/females—Relationship

Relationship orientation—Males	
Sample size	58
Sample mean	38.5
Sample standard deviation	4.37
Relationship orientation—Females	
Sample size	168
Sample mean	38.79
Sample standard deviation	5.198
Two-tailed test	
t-test statistic	－0.38
p-value	0.70

As can be seen from Table 6, the null hypothesis 4 (Malaysian respondents will have similar scores on task orientation as the respondents from the United States.) is rejected because t=－7.27 does not fall within the critical value of +1.97 and－1.97. Also, because the p-value is smaller than alpha (α) = 0.05, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Based on these results, Malaysian respondents' scores are significantly different or lower from the American respondents. The alternative hypothesis is supported since the Malaysian respondents have significantly lower scores on task orientation than the respondents from the United States.

Table 6   USA vs. Malaysia—Task

Task orientation—Malaysia	
Sample size	216
Sample mean	36.19
Sample standard deviation	5.15
Task orientation—United States	
Sample size	87
Sample mean	41.18
Sample standard deviation	5.99
Two-tailed test	
t-test statistic	－7.27
p-value	3.06238E-12

As can be seen from Table 7 and using the *t*-test for differences in two means, at a 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis 5 (Malaysian respondents will have similar scores on relationship orientation as the respondents from the United States.) is rejected because $t=－7.48$ does not fall within the critical values and the *p*-value is smaller than alpha. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the Malaysian respondents have significantly lower scores on relationship orientation than the respondents from the United States.

Table 7　USA vs. Malaysia—Relationship

Relationship orientation—Malaysia	
Sample size	216
Sample mean	38.71
Sample standard deviation	4.98
Relationship Orientation—United States	
Sample size	87
Sample mean	43.39
Sample standard deviation	4.78
Two-tailed test	
t-test statistic	－7.48
p-value	7.92048E-13

In regard to gender-related stress perceptions, as can be seen from Table 8 and using the t-test for differences in two means, at a 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis 6 (Malaysians will report a moderate level of work overload stress.) is rejected because their mean stress perception score (31.19) is above the moderate range. Malaysians, as a group, have demonstrated a high level of stress. Participant's mean scores in the range of 30-39 tend to mean high stress from overload. For these individuals, it is best to identify stressful events, prioritize tasks and work on managing those that are direct causes of stress.

Table 8　Malaysia stress overload scores based on gender

Stress scores	Sample size	Mean	Standard deviation
Male	58	31.02	8.1143
Female	158	31.24	7.07349
Total	216	31.19	7.34866

Notes: Gender: $t = －0.203$; $p = 0.84$.

In regard to gender-related stress perceptions, as can be seen from the t-test for differences in two means, at a 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis 7 (Malaysian male and female respondents will have similar scores for work overload stress.) cannot be rejected because the calculated *t* value (−0.203) falls within the critical value of t for statistical significance; in other words, since the t value falls within the critical values (+1.97 and −1.97), the hypothesis is supported. Furthermore, since the *p*-value (0.839) is greater than alpha (α) = 0.05, there is sufficient evidence to accept the null hypothesis.

Based on the results, the stress perception scores of male and female Malaysians appear to be similar. As such, one can conclude that Malaysians male and female respondents have similar perception of stress based on their task overload activities. Malaysians, with an average score of 31.19, demonstrate a high level of stress. When people are too stressed, perhaps it is best that they prioritize their tasks each week or each day and work on effectively managing those that are direct causes of stress.

It was hypothesized that Malaysian respondents will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations, and the current study did not support this hypothesis. However, when compared with each other, male and female Malaysian respondents did have similar scores for stress perception as well as for task and relationship orientations. Similarly, Malaysian respondents have significantly lower scores on the task and relationship orientations than their American counterparts. So, one can summarize that Malaysian respondents have

significantly lower scores on task and relationship orientations than respondents from the United States.

6. Discussion and implications for readers, business and management practice

The general perception about task-oriented people is that they are kind of individuals who would place less value on, and give less attention to, interpersonal relations and hence are more isolated and less popular. Task-oriented people are perceived as careless individuals who are concentrating only on getting things done. In contrast, relationship-oriented individuals are more concerned with maintaining happy, harmonious personal relationships and with high interest in group activities (Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009). However, the results of study showed something a little different. In regard to American respondents, they are demonstrating the same level of sensitivity towards both the task and relationship orientations. They are high on both task and relationship orientations. These results are consistent with a study conducted by Bass (1967). He stated that characteristics such as humanitarianism-radicalism and being tolerant of deviance in others are more common among task-oriented people than relationship-oriented people.

One possible explanation could be the Americans' cultural views towards self-oriented people. To say a person is selfish is a pejorative in the American culture. Meanwhile, relationship-orientation characteristics indicate insecurity and uncertainty. Due to their individualistic nature and high-context, the American culture tends to glorify an orientation toward achievement, competition and success. Therefore, even if one is relationship-oriented, one does not acknowledge this as a primary goal. Given this situation, the normal well adjusted person would express the values of society by choosing the task-oriented response and avoiding the socially undesirable self and relationship-oriented responses (Bass, 1967; Mujtaba & Balboa, 2009).

One other possible explanation may be the higher attention given to scientific management strategic methods in United States by the organizations, which put high emphasis on team working and colleagues' collaboration in working environment. So, even individuals may be interested in doing the best job possible and see the tasks to successful completion; Thus, they have learnt that they need to work well within a group, perceiving that contribution to the group effort will contribute to the overall success of the task. According to World Business Culture (2009), in the United States, during the period that the group is together, everybody is expected to be fully committed to the common goals and to work with dedication and purpose to ensure that those goals are achieved. It is important to show enthusiasm for the project and to show belief in the ultimate achievement of the objectives. However, when the project is completed, the team will rapidly dissipate its members moving on to the next task with confidence and equanimity. As a result, one implication of this research is that even though a low-context group's orientation toward individualistic cultures (such as people from the United States) might be very high, this research has concluded that they can be highly focused on the relationship while completing their tasks.

Interestingly, Malaysian showed lower level of relationship orientation in comparison with their U.S. counterparts. This was also true for their level of task orientation. These could be explained by the fact that Malaysians, due to their high-context culture and collective orientation, put more emphasis on the general aspects of life and not just the work-life which happens to be focused mainly on tasks. Also, perhaps Malaysians are balancing their work-life while socializing to meet their collective-orientation needs. Nevertheless, as it was expected this research has shown that Malaysian respondents from a high-context culture are in the moderately higher range on relationship-orientation. Therefore, managers and supervisors should feel comfortable in knowing that Malaysian employees will get their jobs done in a timely manner while maintaining a healthy relationship

with their colleagues, peers, customers, and superiors.

Based on a study by Bouffard, Boisvert, Vezeau, and Larouche (1995), women scored higher than men in task orientation in a college sample. However, this study shows that Malaysian male and female respondents have similar scores on both task and relationship orientations. It may be rooted in this fact that Malaysia is a country with low scores in Masculinity/Femininity index. While Malaysia is an Islamic country many women work and many reach senior positions. According to World Business Culture (2009), women travelling to Malaysia on business will encounter even fewer problems than they might in other developed countries in the region such as Japan or Taiwan. All these may indicate that female Malaysian workers expect to be treated equally with their male counterparts by management.

In addition, a strong relationship may directly influence the progress and continuous improvement of employees' performance. Personal interaction and communication with colleagues and clients, such as telephone calls or e-mail communications can be promoted by management since these skills are essential for enhancing their relationships and creating a stronger bond and trust with their clients and colleagues beyond those generally present in a work environment (Panayides, 2005).

The other outcome of this study shows that Malaysians are suffering from a high level of work overload stress. These results are similar for both male and female respondents and are consistence with results of a study by Kariv and Heiman (2005) which stated that gender effects did not appear in examinations of the interactions between stress perceptions. Experiencing overload stress in the workplace could lead to burnout, a dangerous stage that can reduce employees' efficiency severely. Furthermore, high level of stress may cause damages to both health and wellbeing of people who are suffering from it. Dealing with high levels of stress on a consistent basis can even lead to stress disorders which may wreck a person's life entirely. Workplace frustration, overload at work, lack of time, rushing from one job to another, and not meeting deadlines are among some of the reason for perceptions of overload stress. There are some techniques that can be implemented by both Malaysian employees and managers to partially reduce some negative effects of stress. Use of time management, support network (with people who employees can share their problems), attitude change, and learning some relaxation techniques are considered some of best methods for stress management (StartRunGrow, 2005). Furthermore, Teratanvat and Kleiner (2001) suggested three strategic categories which can be drawn from human resource and quality management for addressing the source of stress, they are attacking uncertainty and balancing the load in each situation, promoting employee success both on the job and off the job, and providing a participative, supportive organizational culture for all workers.

7. Limitations and recommendation for further research

There are several limitations to this study and the small number of responses from the United States is one of them. One specific limitation is the fact that this study was conducted with a convenient population in the two countries. Future studies can compare populations with similar working backgrounds and demographic variables.

While the Malaysian population seem to have a significantly higher focus on the relationship orientation, this might be true simply because they understand the importance of maintaining a good connection with their vendors, suppliers, and customers. It is possible that these respondents are more relationship-oriented simply due to chance or due to the years of socialization in the high context, collective culture. However, these results cannot be generalized to the total population as it is based on a small number of working adults. As such, future studies can

focus on increase the sample size with similar working populations in Malaysia and in the United States, and such research can analyze the responses based on different training backgrounds and categories of age to see if having more experience or being older makes a difference in the task or relationship orientation scores of respondents from high and low context cultures. Finally, researchers should also note that management experience seems to be a variable or factor in the scores of respondents. Therefore, future studies should compare those who have five or more years of management experience with those who have never been a manager to see if this is a variable in the task and relationship orientation scores of respondents.

8. Conclusion

After reflecting on the behaviors of people in different cultures such as those from Malaysia and the United States, one is better able to get an understanding of Malay and American workers and their cultures. The results of this study show that Malaysian respondents are more focused on their relationships than the tasks. Furthermore, as shown in the responses, Malaysian male and female respondents feel equally stressed as they collectively demonstrate a high level of stress overload perception. Furthermore, there are no significant differences in the stress overload perceptions of these males and females in Malaysia. As demonstrated through various cases and research studies, people usually function in the way that they are accustomed to working based on their cultural upbringing and socialization. However, despite a group's individualistic orientation in a low-context culture (such as people from the United States), this research has implied that they can be highly focused on the relationship while completing their tasks.

Task-oriented people are not careless individuals but rather disciplined and focused on getting their jobs done. Americans demonstrated the same level of sensitivity towards both the task and relationship orientations as they are high on task and relationship orientations. In the United States, as mentioned before, everybody is expected to be committed to the common goals and to work with dedication and purpose to ensure that those goals are achieved by the team. When the project is completed, the team will dissipate and often move on to the next task.

Relationship-oriented people are not necessarily letting go of their deadlines in order to focus on their relationship. Yes, Malaysians showed lower level of relationship orientation in comparison with their U.S. counterparts but they are focused on this dimension as they are on their tasks. Perhaps, Malaysians are balancing their work-life while socializing to meet their collective-orientation needs. Nevertheless, Malaysians are in the moderately higher range on relationship-orientation. Malaysian male and female respondents have similar scores on both task and relationship orientations. It is true that women travelling to Malaysia will encounter fewer problems than they might in other developed countries in the region.

In regards to stress management, it is concluded that high-context Malaysians are not necessarily less stressed. In general, Malaysians seem to be suffering from a high level of work overload stress. Experiencing overload stress in the workplace could lead to burnout, a dangerous stage that can reduce employees' efficiency severely. Dealing with high levels of stress on a consistent basis can even lead to stress disorders which may wreck a person's life entirely. There are some techniques that can be implemented by both Malaysian employees and managers to partially reduce some negative effects of stress. Use of time management, support network (with people who employees can share their problems), attitude change, and learning some relaxation techniques are considered some of best methods for stress management. Of course, these stress reduction strategies are helpful for all employees and managers throughout the world and should be used to balance life's important goals with

one's personal health and wellbeing.

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