# Understanding of Love and Leadership Preferences: Cross-Cultural Approach

Alexander Averin
*Liberty University*, abaverin@liberty.edu

Richard Diddams
*Liberty University*, rdiddams@liberty.edu

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Alexander Averin, PhD

Richard Diddams, DBA, CxA, SHRM-CP

## Abstract

While there is a plethora of research about the influence of culture on leadership behavior (Den Hartog et al., 1999; Dickson et al., 2003; Dorfman et al., 2012), there is very limited and inconsistent understanding of the impact of love on leadership preferences. This paper examined the fundamental human sentiment of love and how understanding of it in different cultures informs leadership preferences in those contexts. The study employed a qualitative design methodology to explore understanding of love and leadership preferences via open-ended surveys and in-depth interviews of respondents representing two dissimilar cultures of China and the United States. These countries were selected because of their distinct cultural differences along the dimensions of power distance, individualism, long-term orientation, and indulgence (Hofstede, 1980). The findings of this research shed needed light on the understanding of one of the most foundational virtues in different cultural contexts and its implications for leadership behavior.

*Keywords:* love, leadership, culture

An interplay of human sentiment and leadership has drawn some attention in intellectual circles in the few decades, however, very limited scholarly light has been shed on the understanding of love through a lens of culture and its influence on leadership preferences. The purpose of this work was to explore the sentiment of love and how understanding of it in different cultures informs leadership preferences in those contexts. The study and its goals are an attempt to obtain a holistic description and better understanding of this interconnection through exploration of the phenomenon in the cultures of the United States and China. These countries were selected because of their distinct cultural differences along the dimensions of power distance, individualism, long-term orientation, and indulgence (Hofstede, 1980).

## Study Propositions

Understanding of love as an altruistic sentiment, strength, and a driving force for sacrificial behavior provides a fertile ground for authentic and servant leadership preferences. Conversely, the romanticized view of love as means of emotional connection constricts this sentiment to a more personal sphere and leaving organizational leadership to more authoritative and transactional inclinations. By recognizing the role of love in leadership development and organizational dynamics, scholars and practitioners can cultivate environments that inspire trust, promote collaboration, and drive sustainable growth.

## Literature Review

Current scholarly literature is quite limited in exploring leadership in the context of understanding of love. While only a few scholars delved in the topic of synergy between love and leadership (i.e., Caldwell & Dixon, 2010; Patterson, 2010; Winston, 2018), more research pointed to importance of its exploration through tangential but relevant studies.

Specifically, Caldwell and Dixon (2010) discussed the critical values of love, forgiveness, and trust in modern organizational leadership. Caldwell and Dixon's (2010)study identified these virtues as essential for maximizing organizational value and fostering employee development. While the authors emphasized the role of love, forgiveness, and trust in inspiring and motivating employees, thus, contributing to a positive organizational culture, the construct of love and its understanding among the respondents was not explored.

Patterson (2010) took a different approached and examined servant leadership and its basis in love. The author defined servant leadership from a perspective of love, exploring its implications for leaders, followers, and organizations. Patterson (2010) emphasized the transformative power of love in leadership, highlighting its benefits for employee well-being and organizational culture, however, what love meant to the recipients remained unaddressed.

On the other hand, Winston (2018) conducted a study that explored the virtue of love as a foundation for leadership, drawing on biblical principles and contemporary organizational contexts. The author discussed the attributes and manifestations of love in leadership, emphasizing its transformative potential in organizational settings. Winston (2018) provided an excellent framework for understanding a strong connection between biblical understanding of love and effective organizational leadership, which is further explored in this study. While the studies mentioned above highlight the gap in research exploring the relationship between understanding of love and their implications for organizational leadership, the following scholars explored the relationship between human sentiments and their implications for organizational dynamics, thus further pointing to the need for further research of the topic of this study.

Specifically, Miller (2006) emphasized the importance of love in transforming leadership, emphasizing its overlooked significance in leadership theory. Drawing on the seminal work of Burns (1978), the author underscored the transformative effect love has on leaders and their followers, calling for further investigation into the relationship between love and leadership. Gooty et al. (2010) presented a review of leadership, affect, and emotions. Gooty et al.'s (2010) study identified three main themes related to affect, emotions, and emotional competencies in leadership, highlighting varying levels of construct definition and design/measurement issues. The authors recommended future research directions to address these gaps and advance understanding in this area.

Parry and Kempster (2014) undertook a broad approach to exploration of charismatic leadership, examining followers' narratives and metaphors. Parry and Kempster's (2014)study suggested that charismatic leadership is constructed through followers' implicit narratives, which may involve positive or negative affective experiences. The authors proposed that charismatic leadership is less a divine gift and more a "gift from followers," emphasizing the role of follower perceptions in shaping leadership identities, which provides an opportunity for further investigation of how understanding of love shapes followers' preferences of leadership behavior.

Finally, Maharaj and April (2017) explored the power of self-love in leadership and organizational engagement. Maharaj and April's (2017) study identified self-love as a fundamental aspect of effective leadership, leading to improved decision-making, employee commitment, and organizational innovation. While the authors proposed a definition and model for self-love, emphasizing its importance in leadership development, the intersection of understanding of love, as human sentiment, and leadership preferences, remained unexplored. Ultimately, the highlighted review points to a lack of scholarly effort to explore love and its connection with leadership preferences. Further

research in this area is needed to deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between love and leadership in diverse organizational and cultural contexts.

## Method

The study employed a phenomenological qualitative research method utilizing interviews and open-ended surveys to better understand the cultural views of love and prevalent leadership behavior (Stake, 2010). This type of research is a useful means for discovering and understanding the meaning of a human or social phenomenon in individuals or groups and delivers a better grasp of induvial and societal behavior (Laverty, 2003). It obtains insight through the discovery of meanings, allows the research to unfold naturally in a real-world setting, and is an ideal method to explore human behavior (Alase, 2017; Lichtman, 2014; Stake, 2010). Specifically, phenomenological research involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). It is the researcher's intent to identify the essence of each human experience or phenomena as explained by research participants with the aims to understand "lived-in" experiences of contributors (Vagle, 2016).

## Findings

The research was conducted via an unstructured survey of 53 respondents from China and 21 respondents in the United States which elicited in-depth responses and deep insights reflecting lived-in experiences and views of each cultural group. No personal identifiable information was collected in either group. Utilizing data saturation perspective that focuses on the extent of data needed until no new information is gained (Fusch & Ness, 2015), saturation was reached at 35 respondents in the pool of participants from China and 20 respondents in the pool of participants from the United States. Two main categories of love and leadership were explored through 11 questions prompting respondents to

delve in their personal and professional experiences and understandings, uncovering the following themes.

**Personal Understanding of Love**

Starting with personal understanding of love, the responses from U.S. and Chinese respondents revealed a deep understanding of love as a complex emotion that goes beyond mere feelings. Both groups highlighted the importance of selflessness, sacrifice, and putting the needs of others above one's own desires in defining love and acknowledged the universal nature of love and its significance in human relationships and interactions.

Conversely, the revealed differences showed that U.S. respondents often root their understanding of love in religious or spiritual beliefs, while this aspect is not explicitly mentioned in the theme from Chinese respondents. Notably, the majority of responses provided by U.S. participants grounded their understanding of love on Jesus Christ and the Bible:

- "I define love as an action and a choice, not a feeling. It implies sacrifice and perseverance and can only come from God."

- I define love the same way as 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 defines love: love is the practice of being patient, kind, not envious, selfless, not irritable, not keeping a record of wrongs, discouraging sin while rejoicing in righteousness; bearing all things with people, believing all things for people, hoping all things for people, and enduring all things with people. These are all actions that you do in relationship with people, especially when you don't feel like it.

- "To me, love is a choice you have to make every day, with a romantic partner, but love is also the manifestation of God in our lives."

- Love is an innate emotion, given to humanity by the Creator, either for someone or something as an extreme form of appreciation. Personally, love is an emotion bestowed to others of whom I am extremely familiar and share commonalities with, and is a feeling received by others of whom I feel valued and cared for by.

- "I define love as a construct whose attributes are detailed by 1 Corinthians 13:4-8."

- Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away as defined in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

- First, we must understand that the word love in most cultures is overused and the true meaning of love has been diminished. I define love as a gift from God. God is love. Love is unconditional and is the root of all good and all light. To me it means believing that with love I can overcome all things and find my way to forgive others. It means respect for others and is the foundation of my character. Love thy Neighbor as thy self…my daily journey as director by God who is love.

While absent of spiritual emphasis in the understanding of love, the theme from Chinese respondents was revealed a multifaceted nature of love and its significance in human relationships and personal growth. It underscored love as a complex emotion involving care, acceptance, understanding, support, and sacrifice. Additionally, the responses emphasized the importance of love in fostering connections, providing warmth and security, and contributing to personal fulfillment and happiness.

Overall, the theme centered on the diverse ways in which love influences individuals' perceptions,

behaviors, and interactions with others and the world around them, as depicted in the following

examples:

- "Love is an emotion where you feel the joy that you are being cared by others and also

  caring for others. It means the purpose of life- love others, love self and love community."

- "Love is a feeling of being accepted, it means giving love to others without your own

  judgment."

- "Sense of intimacy and sense of mutual belongings to each other. Typically, there are loves

  for self, for partner, for kids, for parents and family members, for a group who belongs to,

  for hometown, for mother land, for nature…"

- "Love is responsibility, love is the willingness to help others. Love is understanding and

  objective."

- "Love is a feeling of warmth, kindness, trust and admiration, positive emotional state

  relating to someone or something."

- "Love is a feeling, a state and an action."

- "Love is the most important basic human ability for building trustworthy connections with

  ourselves and our world. to me, love is the nature of humanity, the key element of human

  value."

- I define love as the most positive energy, the greatest tolerance, openness, and acceptance to

  people and the world around you. It means the source of courage being myself and growing

  myself and it means the energy I give others being themselves and growing themselves.

**Impact of Love on Relationship with Others**

The responses from U.S. and Chinese respondents revealed a common theme that highlighted the transformative power of love in shaping personal and professional interactions. They recognize love as a guiding principle that fosters forgiveness, patience, selflessness, empathy, and positive environments. Both sets of respondents emphasized the importance of prioritizing the needs of others and striving for unity and collaboration in relationships, whether personal or professional, and viewed love as an enduring force that enables individuals to endure hardships and prioritize the well-being of others, despite personal struggles or challenges they may face.

Interestingly, while the underlying motive of caring for others and pursuing what is best for them remains consistent in both groups, the theme from U.S. respondents emphasized the influence of love on relationships, teamwork, and leadership in both personal and professional spheres. In contrast, the theme from Chinese respondents focuses specifically on the impact of love in professional settings. The Chinese theme highlighted its role in fostering collaboration, communication, conflict resolution, and personal development within workspaces.

While both groups expressed the nuances of love, such as empathy, support, understanding, and respect, they revealed different aspects or perspectives influenced by cultural norms and values. For instance, one of the Chinese respondents extrapolates deeper on the notions of a "team" and "love:" What is the notion of "team members," if it is alluding to teammates in competitions or co-workers in an organization, then I think it is abusing/misusing the term "love." These people are only aligned because of a common goal; it has nothing to do with love, and the term has been overused. "Some say we can generate energy with love, it's a mere academic discussion on paper, which is something we should

avoid in business modeling." On the other hand, a different response from the same pool of respondents revealed a different perspective regarding the impact of love on relationship with others:

> You will find that you will come into contact with strange and very different people in your life. I will get used to finding the good and interesting features of others, rather than always staring at the bad side of others. I find myself more tolerant and easy to get along with others. In return, my colleagues and team members will find it easy to communicate and work with me.

Interestingly, the pool of U.S. responses revealed similar themes about the relationship between love and personal as well as professional interactions. For instance, one U.S. respondent shared:

> My personal understanding of love allows me to see other individuals as more than merely flesh and seeks to extend patience and kindness. The innate aspect of love helps me to connect with others and typically increases through knowledge and understanding of another person and their circumstances, while the physical, fleshly aspect of love often causes tension as people exhibit annoying characteristics and differences arise. In terms of colleagues and team members, love aids in seeking to create unity and productive, positive environments where all are welcomed and feel valued.

On the other hand, another U.S. participant provided a different view of love in personal and professional settings: "I separate the two. There's a strict line of personal versus professional at play between the two."

**Understanding of Love and Its Impact on Leadership Preferences**

In discussing the impact of understanding of love on leadership preferences, both U.S. and Chinese respondents acknowledged a preference for leadership styles characterized by compassion, empathy, inclusivity, and a genuine concern for others' well-being. Both groups valued a servant

leadership approach, which prioritizes humility, empathy, and a commitment to serving others over authoritative or dictatorial leadership styles. They recognized that love, understood as care, empathy, and understanding, can influence leadership styles and the dynamics within teams.

However, while U.S. respondents emphasized the importance of leaders demonstrating love through actions, such as prioritizing the well-being and growth of their team members and treating everyone fairly, the theme from Chinese respondents mentioned that some individuals may prioritize different leadership qualities such as responsibility, empathy, compassion, transparency, emotional intelligence, trust, support, and charisma, or separate personal feelings from professional relationships, suggesting a potential difference in how personal and professional boundaries are navigated in leadership contexts compared to the U.S. perspective as demonstrated in several responses:

- "As long as there is a common goal that we're striving towards, then the first priority is to accomplish it, the means and styles are less important, there are no 'ideal world scenarios,' so I can't be picky."

- "I'm not sure about this. I won't "love" my leaders, I appreciate certain leadership styles or behaviors. Love to me is more personally, it is an affection among family members."

- "To be frank, I do not love the people involved in my work, and love does not affect my work and leadership role in my work."

- "… love is more about life, in workplace we are more like work partners."

- "Love isn't that important, true leadership power is build on rational thinking, and insights and grasp of humanity itself."

Overall, while both U.S. and Chinese respondents share common ground in recognizing the influence of love on leadership styles and dynamics within teams, their perspectives varied in terms of

emphasis on actions versus words, preference for specific leadership qualities, and navigation of personal versus professional boundaries. These differences reflect cultural nuances and priorities in understanding the relationship between love and leadership within their respective contexts.

**Love and Leadership: Challenges and Limitations**

Comparing the themes from U.S. and Chinese respondents revealed several similarities and differences in their perspectives on the challenges associated with integrating love and empathy into leadership roles.

**Struggle with Balancing Compassion and Authority**: Both U.S. and Chinese respondents highlighted the challenge of finding the right balance between showing compassion and maintaining authority. Leaders may face difficulties in expressing empathy while still upholding standards and making tough decisions.

**Risk of Perceived Weakness**: Both groups acknowledged the risk of expressions of love and empathy being perceived as weaknesses, which can lead to skepticism, resistance, or concerns about compromising objectivity, fairness, or accountability.

**Boundary Issues**: Both groups mentioned the risk of crossing personal boundaries or undermining authority if relationships become too personal or if leaders prioritize being liked over making difficult decisions. Striking the right balance between nurturing relationships and maintaining professional boundaries is identified as a challenge by both groups.

**Importance of Building Relationships**: Both U.S. and Chinese respondents emphasized the importance of developing strong connections with team members based on mutual respect, openness, and understanding. They recognize that building relationships lays the foundation for expressing love and empathy in leadership roles effectively.

**Balance between Accountability and Support**: Both groups highlight the need for leaders to balance holding team members accountable with offering support and encouragement for growth. They emphasize the importance of self-awareness, clear communication, and adapting leadership styles based on individual needs and preferences.

**Role of Communication**: Both groups stressed the importance of clear and honest communication in navigating the challenges associated with expressing love and empathy in leadership roles. They advocated for setting clear expectations, providing feedback, and fostering open dialogue to mitigate misunderstandings and build trust among team members.

Notwithstanding the above commonalities, both the U.S. and Chinese participants revealed the areas of differences in their discussion of love and leadership, which included:

**Cultural Barriers**: The theme from Chinese respondents highlights cultural barriers as a specific challenge in integrating expressions of love or empathy into leadership roles. Leaders may face concerns about being perceived as weak or overly emotional due to cultural norms or expectations.

**Alignment with Organizational Goals**: The theme from Chinese respondents mentioned challenges in aligning personal feelings with organizational goals and navigating conflicts between individual and organizational needs. This aspect was not explicitly addressed in the theme from U.S. respondents, which focused more on challenges related to maintaining authority and professional boundaries.

**Resource Constraints**: The theme from Chinese respondents discussed challenges related to time and resource constraints involved in meeting emotional needs, which was not very explicitly mentioned in the theme from U.S. respondents.

**Role of Faith and Spirituality**: The theme from U.S. respondents highlighted the role of spirituality and faith, specifically in Jesus Christ, in guiding leaders to express love authentically and navigate challenges with sincerity. This aspect was not explicitly mentioned in the theme from Chinese respondents, which focused more on the balance between expressions of love or empathy and maintaining authority and respect.

**Emphasis on Professionalism and Accountability**: The theme from Chinese respondents emphasized the importance of balancing expressions of love or empathy with maintaining authority and respect in leadership roles. It stressed authenticity, fairness, and consistency in actions and decisions, as well as effective communication, active listening, and transparency, as key components of successful leadership.

Overall, while both U.S. and Chinese respondents share common ground in recognizing the importance of building relationships, balancing accountability and support, and the role of communication in integrating expressions of love and empathy into leadership roles, their perspectives differ in terms of cultural barriers, alignment with organizational goals, resource constraints, the role of faith and spirituality, as well as the emphasis on professionalism and accountability. These differences reflect cultural nuances and priorities in understanding and practicing effective leadership within their respective contexts.

## Limitations of the Study

The findings offer valuable insights into the perspectives of U.S. and Chinese respondents on the definitions of love, its influence on leadership preferences, and the challenges and benefits of integrating expressions of love and empathy into leadership roles. However, there are several limitations to consider:

**Sample Representativeness**: The findings are based on responses from U.S. and Chinese respondents, which may not fully represent the diverse range of perspectives within these populations. The views presented may be influenced by various factors such as age, gender, cultural background, and personal experiences, which may not be adequately captured in the study.

**Generalizability**: While the findings offer insights into the perspectives of U.S. and Chinese respondents, they may not be generalizable to other cultural or geographical contexts. The cultural, spiritual, and religious values, norms, and practices that influence perceptions of love and leadership may vary significantly across different regions and populations.

**Temporal Context**: The findings are based on responses collected at a specific point in time and may not reflect changes or developments in attitudes, beliefs, or cultural norms since the data collection period. It's essential to consider the temporal context and any potential shifts in societal perspectives over time.

<div align="center">

**Conclusion**

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The study participants representing U.S. and Chinese culture demonstrated a common, deep understanding of love as a complex emotion that involves selflessness, sacrifice, and universal significance in human relationships. They also acknowledged the transformative power of love in shaping personal and professional interactions. Despite commonalities, it is traceable how cultural nuances shape the way love and leadership are understood and expressed. U.S. respondents often referenced spiritual beliefs in Jesus Christ when defining love and leadership, while Chinese respondents focus more on secular aspects and professional contexts.

While both groups value integrity, empathy, communication skills, and leading by example in effective leadership, there are differences in emphasis, with U.S. respondents prioritizing attributes like

humility and trustworthiness, while Chinese respondents focus more on vision and inclusivity. Similarly, both groups recognize the importance of expressing love and empathy in leadership but may differ in their approaches and perceptions, where U.S. respondents highlight personal expressions of love and empathy, while Chinese respondents focus on creating supportive environments and navigating challenges with integrity.

Despite differences, both groups emphasize the foundational role of love in leadership and its impact on organizational dynamics. They advocate for authentic leadership rooted in genuine care and understanding, tailored to cultural contexts and organizational goals, as well as identify challenges in integrating expressions of love and empathy into leadership roles, such as balancing compassion with authority, overcoming cultural barriers, and maintaining professionalism while expressing care for team members. While there are similarities in the understanding of love and its importance in leadership between U.S. and Chinese respondents, cultural differences shape their perspectives and approaches. Recognizing and navigating these differences can lead to more effective leadership practices that foster positive relationships, trust, and organizational success.

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