

# IMPACT OF THINKING PREFERENCES ON THE LEADERSHIP STYLES OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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## Abstract

Many social and psychological factors may contribute in building leadership qualities among the individuals. The current study examines the role of school principals' thinking preferences in predicting their leadership styles. 20-items rational-experiential inventory (REI-20) and 18-items questionnaire for leadership styles (QLS) were adapted to collect data from a Pakistani sample. 450 secondary school principals participated in the study. The school leaders unfolded their thinking preferences in making routine decision. They also opined on QLS that contained indicators of three major leadership styles i.e. *laissez-faire*, authoritative and democratic. The findings of the study reveal that the prevalence of rational thinking skills as well as democratic leadership style is prominent among the participants. The research confirms the contributory role of the school principals' thinking preferences in predicting their democratic leadership.

**Keywords:** cognitive processes; management; rationality; school principals.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leader, in modern concept, is a change manager who facilitates, collaborates, and promotes diversity in the organization. "Hero leader" who acts as stabilizer, controller, competitor, and diversity avoider is gradually losing her effectiveness (Bonnici, 2011; Daft, 2014). Organizational heads follow various patterns to execute their responsibilities in which authoritative, democratic and *laissez-faire* models are prominent (Iqbal, 2011). Explaining leaders' performances, examining their certain decisions and predicting leaderships styles are the topics of substantial interest for many researchers (R. E. de Vries, 2012; Dumitriu, Timofti, Nechita, & Dumitriu, 2014). These types of inquiries have demonstrated tremendous implications for leadership practices in different organizational fields.

Research confirms correlates among different psychometric and cognitive characteristics of leaders and leadership effectiveness (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Joseph, Dhanani, Shen, McHugh, & McCord, 2015; Woo, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Conz, 2013). The affective revolution has brought a transformation in inquiries of organizational behaviors of different stake holders and supported the emergence of cross-disciplinary paradigm.

Researchers, under this new paradigm, attempted to explain leadership behaviors under their psychometric and affective proficiencies (Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2008). We, in this research, examined the role of leaders' cognitive preferences in explaining their leadership styles.

We followed cognitive-experiential theory (CET) which postulates that two independent and distinctive information processing systems operate in human's decision making. Rational system is reason based and depends on people's understanding of logic and consideration of evidence. Experiential system, on the other hand, learns from experiences and responds to situations according to principles of experiential processing (Epstein, 2014). Rational thinking process requires utilization of high cognitive resources, the experiential system, however, is minimal demanding for reasoning and intellectual endeavors. Both processes are essential for a balance human personality. Generally, people operate both systems in varied conditions. Research, however, demonstrate that despite the presence of the both systems, people vary due to their preferences for the systems. People choose to follow rational or experiential cognitive systems in their routine decision making (Buzdar, Ali, & Tariq, 2015; Epstein, 2003; Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, & Heier, 1996). This research investigated the role of leaders' varied cognitive preferences in framing their leadership styles.

## 2. THE CURRENT STUDY

We know that people differ in their thinking patterns. Leaders also vary in selecting their leadership styles (Burke & Collins, 2001; Epstein, 2014; Epstein, et al., 1996; Iqbal, 2011). This study focused to find out relationships between thinking and leadership styles. We invited secondary school principals to participate in the study and aimed to find out the role of leaders' thinking preferences in explaining their leadership styles. We followed cognitive experiential theory to identify thinking preferences of the school leaders, whereas the prevalence of three distinctive leadership styles i.e. authoritative, democratic and *laissez-faire* were examine to establish their leadership practices. The study answered following research questions;

1. To what extent do the secondary school principals in the sample demonstrate authoritative, democratic and *laissez-faire* leadership styles?
2. To what extent do the secondary school principals in the sample show preferences for rational or experiential style of thinking in their decision-making process?
3. Do the thinking styles of the secondary school principals predict their leadership styles?

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Major part of the leadership research follows one of the two major approaches i.e. the attribution theory of leadership and psychodynamic theory of leadership (Winkler, 2010). The both approaches although are claimed

to be independent yet their fundamental principles are based on the explanations of leaders' traits and behaviors. The differences between the two theories lie on the gauging and reporting leaders' practices. The attribution theory relies on the facts as attributed by the observers, the psychodynamic approach however is based on fact based deeply rooted understanding of the leadership experiences. The both theories endorse strong emotional associations between the leaders and followers for successful accomplishment of the tasks (M. F. R. K. de Vries, Korotov, Florent-Treacy, & Rook, 2015).

Contemporary literature however uncovers multiple leadership theories, which are categorized into many categories. Major groups of leadership theories include person-centered, group-centered, production and effectiveness centered, relationship centered and transformational and vanguard leadership theories (Dugan, 2017). Some theories on one hand assert on the absolute and universal nature of leadership; the others however claim that the leadership is relational and constructed in response to different factors. The leadership qualities in later paradigm are dependent on the experiences and responses of the leaders.

The relational nature of leadership opens possibilities of investigating factors that have potentials to influence leadership practices of concerned individuals. Examining the role of psychometric attributes of leaders in their leadership styles is an important field of multi-disciplinary research (Humphrey, 2013). Literature unveils the effects of emotional competencies as well as emotional regularizing skills on leadership skills. This activity however is confined on tracing the influences of leaders' thinking styles on their leadership practices following the relational theories of leaderships.

Thinking is widely considered the activity of processing available information and reaching on conclusions but a school of psychologists accepts thinking as the result of processing as well. In both viewpoints reaching or producing conclusions are necessary (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). The cognitive movement in the psychology has introduced the links between thinking and personality and postulates variances in processing information (i.e. thinking) that is associated with variances in personality types and traits (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2014). These theories attempt to explain different ongoing functions in the personality and thinking simultaneously. The explanations in this style help in portraying well documented cognitive centered models of personality as well as cognitive centered models of thinking.

The cognitive-experiential self theory (CEST) is a major instance in this regards that explains the psychodynamic aspects of personality extending the principles of cognitive experiential theory (Epstein, 2003). The theory asserts that two distinctive but interacting information processing modes controls people's decisions and mental functions. The CEST although has implications for evolutionary and cognitive sciences, the idea that human's decisions and actions are controlled by dual cognitive processes has attracted the researchers understanding human decisions in the other fields of social sciences (Cerni, Curtis, & Colmar, 2012). This activity aims on examining the contribution of thinking styles as postulated in cognitive experiential theory (CET) in interpreting

leadership styles of the school principals. Findings of the inquiry help in explaining school leaders' administrative and managerial decisions in the context of cognitive psychology.

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The inquiry was descriptive in nature and quantitative design was followed to accomplish research objectives. To examine the leadership styles, we followed model presented by Northouse (2014) who has accepted three prominent leadership styles (*laissez-faire*, authoritative and democratic) for explaining leaders' behaviors. Northouse has developed a self-reported questionnaire for organizational heads to identify their preferred leadership styles as well (Northouse, 2014). To assess the school leaders' thinking styles, we followed cognitive-experiential self-theory (CEST) presented by Epstein (1994). Epstein has revised the theory labeling it as cognitive experiential theory (Epstein, 2014). Basics of the theory, however, remained similar dividing human cognitive processes into two distinctive styles i.e. rational and experiential. Different versions of rational experiential inventories (REI) based on CEST and CET were available for the research purpose; we followed REI-20 developed by Marks, Hine, Blore, and Phillips (2008). Though REI-20 was developed to assess rational and experiential thinking preferences of the adolescents, it however showed high reliability on the current sample as well (Cronbach alpha values of .82 and .77 for rational and experiential items respectively). Items for the subscales authoritarian, democratic and *laissez-faire* leadership styles demonstrated Cronbach alpha values of .78, .74 and .75 respectively.

We used two-phase random sampling technique to select the sample. At the time of data collection 6125 secondary schools were functioning in 36 districts of Punjab (School Education Department, 2014). In the first phase we randomly selected 4 districts (11%) and collected data of secondary school functioning in these districts. In the second phase we randomly selected 50% of male and female secondary schools and requested their principals to participate in the study. 462 principals provided their consent to participate in the study however 450 of them returned completed questionnaires. We analyzed collected data using descriptive and inferential statistic techniques and attempted to answer the research questions.

#### **5. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

Mean scores representing the respondents' tendency to follow leadership style reveal that the accumulatively school heads included in the sample demonstrate comparatively stronger preferences for democratic leadership styles (M=4.04) than authoritative (M=3.82) and *laissez-faire* (M=3.64) leadership pattern. The principals also showed comparatively stronger inclination of using rational thinking styles in their decision making (M=3.66) than preferring experiential cognitive systems (M=2.69).

The study, however, demonstrates a gap between head teachers' reported and practiced leadership styles. We asked school principals about their leadership styles. 79% of them reported that they preferred democratic leadership style whereas 15.4% and 5.6% reported *laissez-faire* and authoritative styles respectively. Data collected through leadership styles questionnaire, however, demonstrate that only 60.3% head teachers have dominance of democratic leadership style on their practices. 28% and 11.7% have dominance of authoritative and *laissez-faire* leadership styles respectively on their practices. It shows that 18.7% of head teachers included in the sample report that they follow democratic leadership style but in reality they are predominantly authoritative in their practices. Similarly, more than 3% head teachers who told themselves follower of *laissez-faire* leadership style are actually practicing authoritative style. Despite this controversy, it is positive that still majority of the head teachers (60.3%) is comparatively more inclined to practice democratic leadership approach than authoritative and *laissez-faire* styles. Considering dominant leadership practices of secondary school heads we categorized them in authoritative, democratic and *laissez-faire* school leaders.

To statistically compare the thinking styles of the school heads, we run two-way mixed ANOVA with three groups of secondary school heads as between groups variable (3 levels: Authoritative, Democratic and *Laissez-faire*) and type of thinking as within groups variable (2 levels: Rational Thinking, Experiential Thinking) was run to find out between and within effects of the variables.

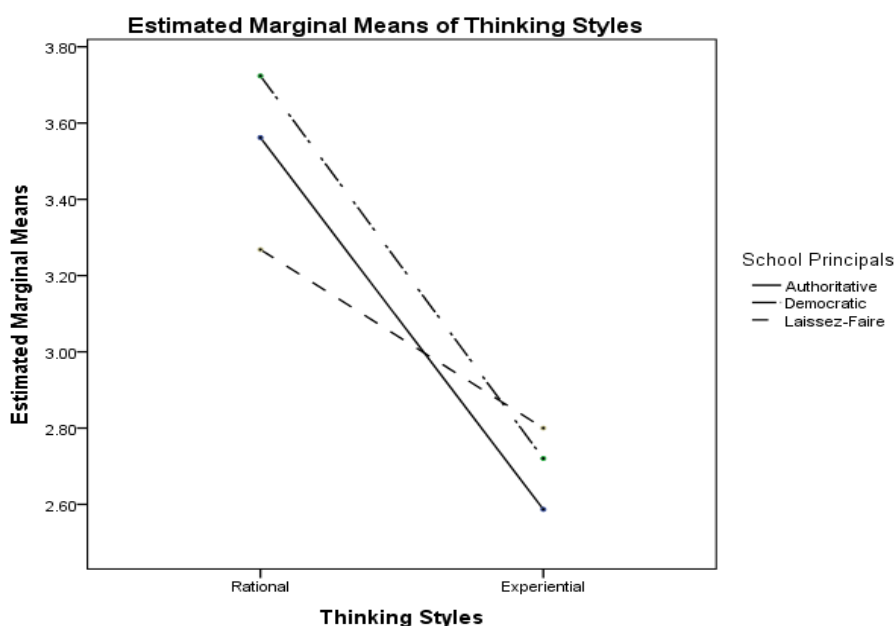


FIGURE 1 – ESTIMATED MARGINAL MEANS OF THINKING STYLES

Line chart of the means showing rational and experiential thinking while differentiating school heads according to their preferred leadership style.

The following results were drawn from the mixed ANOVA that are also presented in Figure 1.

1. The main effect of the thinking styles of the school principals is significant  $F(2, 447) = 10.494, p < .001$ , indicating that the school principals show higher tendency of rational thinking than experiential regardless of their preferred leadership styles (i.e. authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire).
2. The interaction between thinking styles and leadership preferences is significant  $F(2, 447) = 5.505, p < .004$ , indicating that the tendency of using rational thinking is higher in all three groups of school heads than experiential thinking preferences. This elevation is however significantly greater for school heads who prefer democratic leadership styles than other two groups. The school principals who prefer laissez-faire leadership style score highest for experiential thinking and lowest for rational thinking compared to other groups.

Statistics of LSD post-hoc test demonstrate significant differences among the three groups of secondary school principals in their rational and experiential choices.

TABLE 1 - RESULTS OF LSD POST-HOC TEST REVEALING MULTIPLE COMPARISONS AMONG THINKING STYLES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS WITH VARIED PREFERRED LEADERSHIP STYLES.

Thinking Style	School Principals (I)	School Principals (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Rational	Democratic	Authoritarian	.162	.039*
		<i>Laissez-faire</i>	.455	.000***
	Authoritarian	<i>Laissez-faire</i>	.294	.012**
Experiential	<i>Laissez-faire</i>	Authoritarian	.213	.029*
	Democratic	Authoritarian	.133	.042*

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

The school heads that practice democratic leadership style are comparatively more inclined toward using rational thinking in their decision making than the head teachers who prefer authoritarian and *laissez-faire* leadership styles. School principals that practice *laissez-faire* leadership style are comparatively more inclined to follow experiential thinking approach in their decision making process.

TABLE 2 - VALUES OF PEARSON CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS SHOWING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG DIFFERENT THINKING AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

	Rational thinking	Experiential thinking
Authoritative leadership style	.092*	.052
Democratic leadership style	.284**	.073*
<i>Laissez-faire</i> leadership style	-.026	.018

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$

We applied correlation and regression analysis to investigate contributory role of school teachers' thinking styles in explaining variance in their leadership styles' preferences. Pearson Correlation Coefficients reveal significant and direct association between the head teachers' preferences for democratic leadership styles and their tendency to depend on rational thinking in decision making (Table 2). A comparatively weak but significant and direct relationship is also found between the Principals' democratic leadership practices and their experiential

thinking. Data also demonstrate a significant and direct association between rational thinking and authoritarian leadership style of the secondary school heads. Results of the multiple regression are however more rigorous and sophisticated. Multiple regression models show that rational and experiential thinking styles are helpful in explaining only democratic leadership styles of the school principals.

TABLE 3 - RESULTS OF MULTIPLE REGRESSION RUN ON THE SAMPLE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS WITH RATIONAL AND EXPERIENTIAL THINKING CHOICES AS PREDICTOR VARIABLES AND THEIR DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLE AS DEPENDENT VARIABLE.

Predictors	$\beta$ (Standardized)	t-value
Rational thinking	.305	5.360***
Experiential thinking	.189	3.317***
R <sup>2</sup> = .127, F(2, 447) = 15.322***		

Dependent variable: School Principals' preferences for democratic leadership style

\*\*\*p<.001

Rational and experiential thinking styles collectively explain 12.7% variance in the secondary school head teachers' democratic leadership styles. Values of standardized beta ( $\beta$ ) reveal that one unit increase in the head teachers' rational thinking will cause .305 unit increases in their democratic leadership style. Similarly one unit increase in their experiential thinking will cause .189 unit increases in their democratic leadership style. Value of R<sup>2</sup> demonstrate a medium size effect of secondary school principals' thinking styles on their preference for democratic leadership style (Cohen, 1992).

## 6. DISCUSSIONS

Leadership styles have high impacts on organizational culture and productivity. School leaders are not mere administrators of resources yet they have direct concerns with students' achievements, teaching quality, accountability and standards, school funding, technology and educational choices (Sims & Sims, 2015). Rational and creative thinking may enable them to make effective and future oriented decisions. This study claim direct relationship between the school leaders' rational thinking style and their democratic leadership practices. These results are consistent with the findings of Cerni, Curtis, and Colmar (2008) who reported direct association between transformational leadership and rational thinking preferences of Australian school principals. Various leadership models, although, differentiate democratic and transformational styles, both styles however come close on the use of logic, rationality and reason in accomplishing tasks. Northouse (2014) accepts leadership styles on the bases of leaders' behaviors and interaction with their colleagues. Transformational leadership style, on the other hand, is based on organizational objectives set be the leaders. It weighs how leaders view change and how they motivate their team members to accept change (Landy & Conte, 2010). Democratic leader consider her team members' views and develop a consensus based concept of change. In democratic leadership everyone is involved in debate, proposing change, collective decision making, voting and so on (Woods, 2005). In this context, although democratic leader is not fit in charismatic leadership but she is more rational and reason oriented for accomplishing her task. The current study brings a character of democratic leader that is different



from authoritative and *laissez-faire* leaders. Her thinking styles explain medium portion of her leadership style. School heads with *laissez-faire* leadership style have demonstrated comparatively lowest rationality in their thinking choices however they are at top in following experiential thinking with compare to other two groups of leaders. Experiential thinking has demonstrated its contribution in explaining democratic leaders' leadership styles. It supports the basic assumption of cognitive experiential theory (CET) that upholds the importance of both thinking styles in decision making. The dominance of rational thinking in democratic leaders, however, reveals the centrality of rationality in the democratic leadership styles.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The study concludes that the presence of democratic leadership style is comparative higher among the secondary school principals included in the sample. Significant numbers of school heads follow authoritative leadership style whereas very less numbers of school principals practice *laissez-faire* leadership style. We also concluded that majority of the school leaders regardless of their leadership style prefer rational thinking in their decision making. The presence of rationality, however, is comparatively higher in democratic leaders and lowest in school heads with *laissez-faire* leadership style. The presence of experiential thinking is comparatively higher in *laissez-faire* leaders and lowest authoritative leaders. The study reveals significant contribution of school heads' thinking preferences in explaining variances in their democratic leadership style. Co-efficient of determination demonstrates medium size effect of school principals thinking styles on their practices of democratic leadership. One unit increase in rational thinking of the school heads will cause .305 units increase in their democratic practices. Similarly one unit increase in experiential thinking will cause .189 units increase in school principals' democratic leadership practices.

Conclusions of this research have strong implications for professional practices of school principals. We know the role of education in fostering thinking skills among learners. Current research postulates that through inculcating rational thinking approaches, we can make our school leaders more democratic in their leadership practices. This concept is also helpful in planning professional development activities of leaders who follow classical models of authoritative and *laissez-faire* leaderships.

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