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# Relationship between power distance and autocratic-democratic tendencies

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**This study aims to examine the relationship between power distance and autocratic and democratic tendencies. Participants in the study were research assistants pursuing graduate degrees in the Sciences and Social Sciences Institutes of Balikesir University and prospective teachers pursuing undergraduate teaching degrees at Necatibey Education Faculty of Balikesir University in 2009 to 2010 academic year; a total of 278 people. The study is designed quantitatively and the "power distance scale" and democratic tendencies scale were used for data collection. Findings of the study showed that both research assistants and prospective teachers have low power distance and autocratic tendency scores and high democratic tendency scores. In addition, a positive and significant relationship was found between power distance and autocratic tendency, and a negative and significant one between power distance and democratic tendency.**

**Key words:** Power distance, autocratic tendency, democratic tendency, organizational culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Cultures and inter-cultural differences are defined in relation to different economic, social and political combinations (Adler, 1997; Brislin, 1993). Each culture has different patterns of norms and behaviors. From a cognitive perspective, Hofstede (1997) defines culture as a mental programming that differentiates one group from others, and uses power distance, individualism and collectivism, femininity and masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance as cultural characteristics to differentiate national cultures from one another. Cultures with low power distance, individualism, and low uncertainty avoidance, such as Canada and the United States, are mentioned as examples of Type I cultures; and cultures with high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, and collectivism, such as Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American cultures, are defined as Type II cultures (Griffith et al., 2000; House et al., 2004; Hofstede, 1980). The formation of democratic attitudes and values in a society depends on the presence of democracy both as a political system and as a way of living. In this sense, democracy means more that its formal definition. Defined as a government model

consisting of structural, legal and behavioral elements designed for self-government by people (Kalaycioğlu, 1999), democracy is based upon the will of people, but the protection of individual liberties and human rights are other constituting elements of democracy (Türkbay, 2005). In another formulation, democracy is defined as a model of government that is based upon majority rule, protecting individual rights and liberties and striving for equality between citizens (Karsli, 2006; Novak 1994). Novak (1994) and Osler and Starkey (1994) identify the basic concepts of democracy as justice, equality and liberty. A review of literature indicates that there exist many studies on democratic values (Akin and Özdemir, 2009; Çankaya and Seçkin, 2004; Çuhadar; 2006, Doğanay et al., 2003; İflazoğlu and Çaydaş, 2004; Karadağ et al., 2006; Kurt, 2007; Rowland, 2003; Russell and Ong, 2005; Türkbay, 2005; Yurtseven, 2003).

Some of the studies find the democratic tendencies of prospective teachers to be low (Çankaya and Seçkin, 2004), whereas others find that prospective teachers have high democratic tendencies (Türkbay, 2005; Akin and Özdemir, 2009). In another study (Türkbay, 2005), it

was found that students in higher grades have higher democratic tendencies compared to students in lower grades. In the literature, various variables regarding autocratic tendencies among students studying in Turkey have been investigated. Some of these studies were related to epistemological beliefs (Demir, 2005), autocratic tendency and identity status (Demir and Derelioğlu, 2010), religion, nationalism and authoritarianism (Gümüş and Gömleksiz, 1999), and the relationship between autocratic and democratic tendencies (İflazoğlu and Çaydaş, 2004). In these studies, it was revelaed that autocratic tendency varies by age, with older people having weaker such tendencies. Some studies, on the other hand, fail to find a significant relationship between age and autocratic tendencies (Demir and Derelioğlu, 2010). Studies on power distance (Basim, 2000; Erdem, 1996; Terzi, 2004) found that power distance is high both in public and private organizations. Besides, İpek and Duysak (2005) found power distance and anxiety to be related. Nevertheless, whether there is a relationship between the power distance observed in an organization and the autocratic and democratic tendencies of the employees in that organization or not have not been studied in Turkey.

The present study seeks an answer to this question in the context of a university, which has the power of transform social values. The study is also significant as it associates with the relationship between managers and employees in business life with societal culture since power distance is one of the indicators of the culture of a society. The study also calls attention to the influence of organizational culture on managerial practices, and is significant in this sense as well.

**Theoretical framework**

The concept of power distance was first used by Mulder in 1958. It is a measure of the power imbalance between a more powerful individual in a society and a less powerful one (Bruins and Wilke, 1993). For Hofstede (1993), who defined the concept as the level of inequality that is accepted as normal, perceptions of inter-individual inequality is a cultural tendency that varies from organization to organization and from society to society. Hofstede (1980) argues that accepted inequality may be related to prestige, power or prosperity. Societies with high power distance are generally more hierarchical and more bureaucratic. Societies with low power distance, on the other hand, are more market-oriented and less bureaucratic, and have a more open form of communication (Bialas, 2009; Shane, 1994). High or low power distance has implications for managerial practices in a culture as well. According to Hofstede (2001) high power distance may lead to a very autocratic, controlling type of leadership whereas a low power distance may give rise to a more democratic approach. Rodrigues (1998) argues

that cultures with high power distance tend to have authoritarian decision making mechanisms whereas cultures with low power distance tend to have more participatory decision making mechanisms. On the other hand, power distance has important implications for education in a society. In low power distance societies, teachers and students can communicate more easily (Erdoğan et al., 2008; Spencer-Oatey, 1997).

Some studies examine the relationship between power distance, defined as a cultural characteristic by Hofstede (1980), and various national or organizational variables. Thomason (2003) finds that power distance is not related to market size but that societies with low power distance have higher levels of foreign investment. Francesco and Chen (2000) found a positive relationship between low power distance and job satisfaction, organizational loyalty and performance. Greer and Gebren (2008) found that power distance makes a positive impact on the resolution of conflicts in low power distance organizations whereas it makes a negative impact in organizations with high power distance. Eylon and Kevin (1999) found that employees who have high power distance perform better when they are authorized whereas authorization makes no positive contribution to the performance of low power distance employees. Brockner et al. (2001) find power distance to be related to the reaction shown to voice in a culture. Asgari et al. (2008) confirm that power distance affects organizational citizenship behaviors. Studies on the issue, in a general sense, find that organizational variables under consideration are affected by power distance in one way or another.

The concept of authoritarian personality, developed by Adorno et al. (1950), refers to behaviors that are extremely conformist, rigid, obedient to authority, and extremely prejudiced against others. In other words, the concept of autocratic or authoritarian personality is about the people who display non-democratic personality traits. Autocratic tendencies are thought to reflect social views and conceptions that are dominant in late adolescence (Duriez et al., 2007). Authoritarian personality has become a meta concept that collectively refers to all anti-democratic behaviors. It is examined as a pattern of behaviors with both psychological and sociological consequences (Batmaz, 2006). Autocratic tendency is not only about the psychological frames of individuals but also has an organizational aspect. Autocracy means "an unconditional claim to the right to rule" of any bodies or groups exclusive of all others (Çaylak, 2008). It implies a high degree of control by the leaders without much freedom or participation of members in group decisions (Choi, 2007). It adopts blind obedience rather than freedom of choice. To conclude, it is not a concept of the past, and can be observed in many government types or all sorts of organizations at present. In some organizations, it may even be necessary. For example time constraints may sometimes require autocratic decision-making.

Employees with autocratic tendencies have rigid rules.

They believe that they need power and status Differences among people, and resist change (Robbins, 1994). Employees with autocratic tendencies may be successful in organizations with a hierarchical structure, in which employees are required to be extremely obedient to the rules. The autocratic leadership cluster is described as authoritarian, directive, coercive, punitive, cold, task-oriented, persuasive and closed (Bass, 1990). Autocratic leaders make all important decisions without consulting their subordinates and do not allow group participation in decision-making. They concentrate on power and decision making on their own. They expect the employees to do as they are told (Khan, 1999, Newstorm and Davis, 1993). Democratic leaders, on the other hand, tend to share authority with their followers. Decisions are made with the participation of others, and thus, are not unilateral decisions like those made by autocratic leaders. Leaders with democratic tendencies consult with stakeholders and their followers (Eren, 1989; Newstorm and Davis, 1993). It is impossible to make sense of values in isolation from their respective cultures. Thus, personal values and tendencies can only be understood within the context of specific cultures. Democratic culture can be only explained with reference to the development of certain social dynamics. Therefore, it can be observed that democracy culture in Western societies has developed in the context of different social dynamics from Turkish political culture.

Western social structures resulted in industrialization and a political philosophy that is liberal economic in orientation. The political system called liberal democracy or libertarian democracy emerged as a result of this historical process (Tuna, 2000). One of the most important characteristics of democracy is that it is also a matter of culture and way of thinking. Laws and regulations or school curricula do not make people democratic. Still, these criteria are necessary but not sufficient (Büyükdüvenci, 1998). A democratic attitude is formed in and reinforced by the social environments the individual participates, starting with the family. Thus, Yeşil (2001) finds that teachers agree with the idea that democracy can only be learnt by experience in democratic environments. Davies (1999) attributes the development of a democratic culture to the democratization of education systems. On the basis of these observations, it can be argued that human rights and democracy education should be based upon activizing individuals and allowing them to personally experience relevant values, principles and rules (Yeşil, 2004). The roots of democratic norms can be found in various cultural values. As the name suggests, democratic culture refers to the totality of attitudes and behaviors that are displayed by individuals who defend independence and impartiality within the framework of social state of law in societies that have a certain level of cultural development. At the same time, it has been argued that democratic culture can be treated as part of the educational system (Garrison, 2003).

## Aims

This study examines whether there is a relationship between power distance and autocratic and democratic tendencies, and seeks answers to the following questions:

1) What are the power distance and autocratic and democratic tendency levels of the research assistants and prospective teachers who participated in the study?
2) Do research assistants and prospective teachers who participated in the study differ from one another in terms of their power distance and autocratic and democratic tendency levels?
3) Is there a difference between power distance, autocratic and democratic tendencies in terms of gender?
4) Are power distance and autocratic and democratic tendencies related?
5) Is autocratic tendency a significant predictor of power distance?

## METHODS

### Participants

The study was conducted with the participation of the research assistants who pursue their MA and Ph.D. degrees in the Institutes of Sciences and Social Sciences of Balikesir University, and the freshmen and senior students in various departments of the Necatibey Education Faculty (NEF) at Balikesir University. All the graduate students of the Sciences and Social Sciences Institutes who were employed as research assistants in the 2009 to 2010 academic years participated in the study. All the freshmen and senior NEF students of the departments of music education and physical education, with the exception of senior students, participated in the study. Of the 278 participants, 116 were research assistants and 162 prospective teachers.

### Data collection instruments

To measure autocratic and democratic tendencies, the "democratic tendencies scale" developed by Zencirci (2003) was used. Factor loadings of the eight autocracy related items are reported as varying between 0.50 and 0.66, and factor loadings of the ten democracy related items are reported as varying between 0.44 and 0.75. Cronbach's alpha value of the scale is reported to be α = 0.72. Internal criterion validity was analyzed for the top 27% and bottom 27% of the scores, and was found to be significant. To collect the data on power distance, the "power distance scale" developed by the author was used. This power distance scale is a uni-dimensional scale. KMO and Barlett values indicate that it has an interpretable factor structure. The KMO values of the scale were found to be 0.84 and the Barlett value was found to be p<0.000. The single dimension of the scale explains 40.9% of the total variation. Item-total correlations of the nine items of the scale vary between 0.30 and 0.69, and factor loadings vary between 0.37 and 0.80. To examine the reliability of the scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated, and found to be α = 0.80.

**Table 1**. Mean power distance and autocratic and democratic tendency scores.

| Dimensions | N | $\overline{X}$ | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Power distance | 278 | 2.33 | 0.49 |
| Autocratic tendency | 278 | 2.58 | 0.53 |
| Democratic tendency | 278 | 4.00 | 0.51 |

**Table 2**. Inter-group differences between power distance and autocratic and democratic tendency.

| Dimensions | Groups | N | $\overline{X}$ | SD | t-value | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Power distance | Research assistant | 116 | 2.40 | 0.48 | 2.771 | 0.006** |
|  | Prospective teacher | 162 | 2.25 | 0.44 | 2.731 |  |
| Autocratic tendency | Research assistant | 116 | 2.47 | 0.51 | -2.835 | 005** |
|  | Prospective teacher | 162 | 2.66 | 0.54 | -2.867 |  |
| Democratic tendency | Research assistant | 116 | 3.99 | 0.54 | -.315 | 0.753 |
|  | Prospective teacher | 162 | 4.01 | 0.49 |  |  |

**p<0.01.

### Data analysis

Arithmetic mean, independent samples t-test, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient, and simple regression analysis (enter method) were used to analyze the data.

## RESULTS

Here, the data on the relationship between power distance and autocratic and democratic tendencies will be analyzed, and results of the analyses will be presented in tables. To begin with, findings on the first question "what are the power distance and autocratic and democratic tendency levels of the research assistants and prospective teachers who participated in the study are presented in Table 1 which displays research assistants' and prospective teachers' (N = 278) power distance and autocratic and democratic tendency scores, shows that mean levels of power distance ($\overline{X}$ = 2.33) and autocratic tendency ($\overline{X}$ = 2.58) are closest to the "rarely" option, and the mean level of democratic tendency ($\overline{X}$ =4.00) is closest to the "often" option. The results of the t-test on the differences between the views of research assistants and prospective teachers are presented in Table 2. Table 2 reports statistics on the differences between research assistants' and prospective teachers' levels of power distance, autocratic tendency and democratic tendency, and shows that the two groups of participants differ from one another in terms of their power distance and autocratic tendency scores. Research assistants have significantly higher scores for

the dimension of power distance (t = 2.771; p = 0.006**). In other words, their power distance is higher.

In the dimension of autocratic tendency, on the other hand, prospective teachers have significantly higher scores (t = 2.731; p = 0.005**). Autocratic tendencies of prospective teachers are higher compared to research assistants. Power distance perceptions of research assistants are higher than those of the prospective teachers, and autocratic tendency scores of prospective teachers are higher than those of the research assistants. The values indicating the difference between power distance, autocratic and democratic tendencies in terms of gender were given in Table 3. The findings given in Table 3 demonstrate that there is no significant differences between power distance, autocratic and democratic tendencies in terms of gender. The values on the relationship between power distance, autocratic and democratic tendency are reported in Table 4. Table 4 shows that there is a positive relationship between power distance and autocratic tendency r = 35 (p<0.01), and negative relationships between power distance and democratic tendency r = -14 (p<0.05) and between autocratic tendency and democratic tendency r = -0.25 (p<0.01). The findings indicate that democratic tendency decreases, and power distance increases as autocratic tendency increases. Table 5 reports the results of the regression analysis run to evaluate whether autocratic tendency is a significant predictor of power distance.

Table 5 shows that autocratic tendency is a statistically significant predictor of power distance (F = 47.562; p = 0.000). However, autocratic tendency explains only 14% of the variance in power distance. Thus, although it is a

**Table 3.** T-test in accordance with gender.

| Dimensions | Gender | N | $\overline{X}$ | SD | t-value | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Power distance | Female | 161 | 2.35 | 0.46 | 1.604 | 0.110 |
| | Male | 117 | 2.26 | 0.47 | | |
| Autocratic tendency | Female | 161 | 2.62 | 0.49 | 1.322 | 0.187 |
| | Male | 117 | 2.53 | 0.59 | | |
| Democratic tendency | Female | 161 | 3.98 | 0.49 | -864 | 0.388 |
| | Male | 117 | 4.03 | 0.54 | | |

p>0.05.

**Table 4**. Correlations between power distance, autocratic tendency and democratic tendency.

| Dimensions | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Power distance | 1 | 0.349** | -0.138* |
| Autocratic tendency | 0.349** | 1 | -0.255** |
| Democratic tendency | -0.138* | -0.255** | 1 |

N = 278; p<0.01**; p<0.05*.

**Table 5**. Results of the simple regression analysis predicting power distance.

| Variables | B | R | R² | β | t-value | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.569 | | | | 10.424 | 0.000 |
| Autocratic tendency | 0.439 | 147 | 0.144 | 0.383 | 6.897 | 0.000** |

N = 278; F = 47562; p<0.01.

significant predictor, autocratic tendency is not the only predictor of power distance. Based on these findings, it would be safe to argue that analyses of power distance need to take autocratic tendency into consideration as well.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationships between power distance, autocratic tendency and democratic tendency, and found that the mean levels of power distance and autocratic tendency among research assistants and prospective teachers who participated in the study were closer to the "rarely" option whereas their mean democratic tendency scores were closest to the "often" option. These findings do not overlap with Hofstede (1980) findings, who categorize Turkey among the low power distance cultures. In a study that utilizes Hofstede (1980) scale, Erdem (1996) also finds the power distance in Turkish businesses to be high. The findings of the present study concerning levels of power distance do not support the findings found by Kabasakal and Bodur (1998) and Terzi (2004) either. Lack of overlap between

the findings of the present study and those of previous studies on the issue can be explained as follows: organizational culture cannot be explained solely with reference to societal values, and each organization in a sense, creates its own culture. Schools can be considered to be organizations that create their own cultures. In addition, following the systems theory, it could be argued that organizations are affected by time related changes in environmental factors. Power distance tends to decrease in parallel to social development. It could be the case that the Turkish effort to join the European Community has a transformative effect on social values. Thus, Akpinar and Turan (2004) find that primary school teachers view democracy education as a process that is parallel to the process of European Union membership.

The high level of democratic tendency scores observed among prospective teachers and research assistants in the study is encouraging. This is because schools, which are institutions of education, do not only transfer social values, but also transform them. The finding concerning the high level of democratic tendencies among research assistants and students are parallel to the findings of previous studies on the subject. Çuhadar (2006) finds that research assistants and students internalize liberal

conceptions of democracy. Akin and Özdemir (2009) find that prospective teachers have high scores for democratic values, and Yurtseven (2003) finds that teachers in secondary schools have a conception of democracy that is participatory, tolerant and egalitarian. The high level of democratic tendencies among prospective teachers can, in part, be attributed to their college experiences and the educational processes they experience at school. However, these are not the only factors that explain the high level of democratic tendencies. Studies on the topic (Popadic, 2002; Terzi, 2005) find that different social milieus such as family, mass media and peer groups are at least as important in shaping democratic attitudes and epistemological beliefs as school programs are. This study did not find a significant inter-gender difference in the perceptions of democracy among research assistants and among prospective teachers. This finding of the study reveals parallel findings to those of some studies conducted in Turkic cultures (Ektem and Sünbül, 2011; Ercoşkun and Nalçaci, 2008; İflazoğlu and Çaydaş, 2004; Duman, 2010; Gümüş and Gömleksiz, 1999; Kılıc, 2010; Şahin, 2008). However, some of the gender-related findings of the study differ from previous studies. For instance, Genç and Kalafat (2008) found that democratic attitudes among female students are higher compared to democratic attitudes among male students. The study also failed to find any significant differences between the genders with regards to students' autocratic tendencies. This finding supports the results of other studies in the literature (Demir and Derelioğlu, 2010; Rubinstein, 2003). This study found a positive relationship between the power distance and the autocratic tendencies ($r = 0.39$; $p = <0.01$).

In addition, negative relationships were found between the power distance and the democratic tendencies ($r = -14$; $p = <0.05$), and between the democratic and autocratic tendencies ($r = -25$; $p = <0.01$). Although these negative relationships seem to be small in scale, they both indicate that the autocratic tendencies decrease as the democratic tendencies increase. This finding of the study supports İflazoğlu and Çaydaş (2004) findings, where prospective primary school teachers receive high scores for the democratic attitudes and there is a negative relationship between the democratic attitudes and authoritarian attitudes of the prospective teachers. It was found that autocratic tendency explains 14% of the variance in power distance. As the present study is the first one to explore the relationship between power distance and autocratic and democratic tendencies, a comparison to previous findings is not possible in this case. However, the results reinforce our belief in democracy.

## Educational and managerial implications

The positive and moderate level correlation observed between the power distance perceptions and the autocratic tendencies of the prospective teachers and the research assistants indicate that the cultural tendencies that are prevalent in schools need to be taken into consideration in the effort to change autocratic tendencies. This is because schools are the only educational institutions where democratic values are produced. Since the influence of school processes goes beyond what their formal authority aims at, re-structuring educational and managerial processes in schools so that they are more student-centered could be the first step in creating a more democratic society. The most important implication of the present study for school administrators is that managerial practices cannot be considered in isolation from organizational culture, and organizational culture issues need to be addressed to solve the problems observed in managerial practices. This study also reminds school administrators in Turkey that they should be aware of the changes in cultural tendencies that have taken place in Turkey since Hofstede (1980) ground breaking study.

## Limitations and further research

This is the first study conducted on the relationship between the power distance, the autocratic tendency and the democratic tendency in Turkish universities. However, it has a limited participant base. Further studies should be conducted with larger sample groups and with the inclusion of other organizational and individual variables such as organizational climate, locus of control, and self-sufficiency, which would make it possible to reach wider conclusions. This study was conducted in an educational organization that trains prospective teachers. Studies in different organizational structures would make it possible to compare results between different organizations. Further studies would also make it possible to examine the effects of educational organizations on individual tendencies. In addition, qualitative studies can be conducted on the reasons for the moderate level relationship observed between the power distance and the autocratic tendencies in this study.

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