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Reflections on Europe

Reluctance to lead: Conceptualization and contextualization

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicate a potential trend of waning enthusiasm for leadership positions. This increasing trend of avoiding leadership roles has prompted a new area of research, concentrating on agentic perspectives in leader emergence and self-selection biases. This study focuses on a key concept in this emerging field: "reluctance to lead" (RTL). Only recently has reluctance in the leadership context received limited attention from a few scholars. These efforts primarily concentrated on RTL before the role occupancy by defining it as individuals' hesitations to accept a leadership role when presented with the opportunity. This paper broadens the conceptualization of RTL by extending its definition as the hesitation of a high-potential individual both before and after role occupancy (i.e., individuals' hesitations about their fit to the role while it is practiced). Prior studies also adopted a person-centered approach, focusing on identity- and competency-related factors while overlooking the contextual aspects in explaining RTL. This paper integrates contextual foci into the discussion of RTL, specifically exploring how spatial and technological, organizational, leadership, socio-cultural, and historical contexts (with a focus on Europe) interface with RTL. We conclude by proposing a research agenda and discussing the theoretical and practical implications of this new line of research.

1. Reluctance to lead: conceptualization and contextualization

Despite the widely held assumption that leadership positions are attractive and that people are inherently inclined to compete for leadership positions, some individuals do not always prefer to do so (Zhang et al., 2020). In today's world, employees, especially the younger generations, reportedly shun traditional hierarchical career advancement paths and prefer lateral moves in organizations (e.g., Chudzikowski, 2012; Larsson et al., 2023; Shappel, 2022). Indeed, a nationwide survey conducted in the US with more than 3500 employees uncovers that two-thirds of the workers (66%) did not express interest in pursuing leadership roles (Torres, 2014). This appears to be a global trend (e.g., Chernyshenko et al., 2017; Sutela & Lehto, 2014). As stated by Epitropaki (2018), some "talented employees – who are, by all accounts, successful individual contributors – are not willing to step up into managerial positions and claim leadership" (p. 89). The resulting shrinkage of the leadership pipeline is a major problem for organizations (cf. Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). The increasing trend to redesign organizational structures to be agile and flat may render formal leadership obsolete. However, the need for leadership does not seem to diminish in the near future (e.g., Bagheri et al., 2022; Gallup, 2023; Shore & Chung, 2022). Leadership is also an emerging theme in the *future of the work* field, signaling its crucial role in future jobs involving more diverse teams than today (e.g., Ogbeibu et al., 2022; Santana & Cobo, 2020). Yet, research unveils alarming failure rates of those in managerial and leadership roles ranging from 30% to 67% (Griffin et al., 2022; Hogan et al., 2011, 2018). In a recent Gallup study (2015), organizations fail to appoint the right candidates to the talent pools 82% of the time. Because reluctant individuals do not get into the radar of the organizations, the talent pool to choose leaders from becomes very narrow. The shrinkage in the talent pool may be one of the reasons why wrong people are selected as managers and leaders in organizations (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015).

The increasing trend of avoiding leadership roles has spurred a new line of research focusing on the agentic perspectives in leader emergence and self-selection biases (e.g., Aycan & Shelia, 2018; Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Cunningham et al., 2023). In this paper, we focus on a key construct in this nascent literature "reluctance to lead" (RTL). Earlier studies defined it as one's general hesitation about assuming leadership roles "… despite their high potential to be effective leaders" (Epitropaki,

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2018, p. 93). So far, reluctance in the leadership context has had scant attention from only a few scholars (e.g., Bucher et al., 2023; Epitropaki, 2018; Goodwin, 2020). There are also unpublished Ph.D. dissertations on the topic by Tussing (2018) and Burkill (2017). These few attempts mainly focused on RTL before the role occupancy by defining it as individuals' hesitations to accept a leadership role when the opportunity presents itself. We argue that reluctance to lead can also be experienced by leaders holding the position. These studies also adopted a person-centered approach (e.g., identity- and competency-related factors) and overlooked the importance of context in explaining RTL. The current paper broadens the scope of the RTL by expanding its definition as the hesitation of a high-potential individual both before and after the role occupancy (i.e., individuals' hesitations about their fit to the role while it is practiced) and integrates the contextual foci into the discussion of RTL.

Focusing on the RTL construct is particularly important for the emerging "problem of supply" since RTL's ambivalent nature provides an opportunity to steer high-potential individuals towards leadership as they are not firmly fixed in their decision to reject leadership positions or postpone actions in leadership roles. With the right intervention, we believe reluctant but promising employees can be regained to the leadership pipeline by changing their attitude from negative (i.e., reluctance) to positive (i.e., confidence). This will lead to a more enlarged and diversified talent pool from which organizations can choose better leaders.

The literature viewing RTL as an individual-difference variable (Epitropaki, 2018) has not explicitly addressed the role of context. As reviewed by Epitropaki (2018), several streams of research (i.e., leadership emergence, leadership identity, leadership development) identified individual differences as the primary source of the reluctance to lead (e.g., lack of developmental readiness, lower leader identity salience). However, RTL incorporates an interplay of multi-level influences, both individual and contextual. In this paper, we specifically highlight the importance of the country-level context (i.e., values, norms, historical trajectories, and socio-demographic characteristics) and how it is embodied in organizational-level context and implicit assumptions about leadership.

In the following sections of the paper, we first provide an in-depth description of the construct, followed by the nomological network of the concept. Next, we continue with the individual and contextual factors associated with RTL and conclude by proposing a research agenda that focuses on the interplay of individual and contextual factors on the emergence of RTL.

2. Reluctance to lead: defining the concept

Only a few scholars have discussed the concept of reluctance in the leadership context. According to Epitropaki (2018), reluctance occurs when individuals are less eager to step up when they are offered the chance to lead despite their high potential to be effective leaders (p. 93). In the same year, Tussing (2018) defined reluctance to lead as a "… psychological construct that captures one's general hesitation to be a leader" (p. 7). Goodwin (2020) discussed the term in the art and cultural sector to denote cases where individuals undertake leadership activities but reject the title of leader. These considerations focus on individuals' hesitations to accept a formal leadership role when the opportunity presents itself.

We argue that reluctance to lead (RTL) may also occur while individuals are in a leadership role. We expand the definition of RTL as the hesitation of a high-potential individual to exercise leadership experienced before or after the leader role occupancy. More specifically, those who experience reluctance *before* are the ones who hesitate to accept a formal leadership role when it is offered, whereas those who experience it *after* are the ones who hesitate about their fit to the leadership role while it is practiced (see, Shamir & Eilam's research on life stories of leaders, 2005).

Can the RTL level change before and after the role occupancy? In other words, is it possible to experience low reluctance *before* and high reluctance *after* becoming a leader, or vice versa? We argue that it is possible, as Tussing mentioned (2018), "… Levels of reluctance to lead may change over time." (p. 65). Therefore, having high reluctance to become a leader is not a pre-condition to experiencing high reluctance while leading. In other words, an individual may have low reluctance before embarking on the role and develop high reluctance in the role due to various contextual factors, as discussed above.

Reluctance to lead may stem from various factors. The literature focuses on identity- and competency-related factors. For example, Epitropaki (2018) states that reluctance to lead stems from low leader identity salience (i.e., low integration of leader identity into one's self-schema) (see also, Epitropaki et al., 2017). There is also discussion on overqualification (i.e., the role may be beneath one's credentials) (Tussing, 2018) and under qualification (i.e., the role may be above one's credentials) (Tussing, 2018) of individuals feeling reluctant to lead.

Experiencing reluctance after the role occupancy may share some commonality with the impostor syndrome, which is defined as persistent self-doubt about one's qualifications despite the evidence of competence (Clance & Imes, 1978). Recent literature considers leader impostorism as a dynamic state that emerges from the social context (Kark et al., 2021). For instance, in a context where the inclusive organizational climate is low, individuals may perceive demographic factors (e.g., gender, race) as more related to status, leading them to think that they are more inclined to be evaluated primarily on their surface-level attributes rather than their leadership skills or potential, which may, in turn, accentuate their leader impostorism (Kark et al., 2021). However, imposterism is just one of the possible reasons why reluctance is experienced. We propose several context-related factors to aggravate RTL. First, limitations imposed by individuals' life conditions may induce reluctance, such as care responsibilities, health problems, or partners' expatriation to another country. Second, inconducive organizational context may increase reluctance. For example, those considering stepping up for a leadership role may feel reluctant when the organization undergoes a major transformation. Third, the unattractiveness of the benefits and demands of the role (e.g., insufficient remuneration, excessive travel requirements) may heighten reluctance.

We specifically focus on the role of context. RTL is a dynamic construct whose level varies depending on the context in which the leadership role is/will be practiced. An individual's reluctance to lead may be triggered or eased depending on the context of the role. Context can unfold itself in two ways: (1) it may create *actual circumstances* that induce or alleviate one's reluctance to lead, and (2) it may also create the *perception* of person-role misfit that heightens or reduces one's reluctance to lead. For the former, as an example, a leadership context requiring management of a major transformation or severe conflicts is likely to elevate reluctance to lead (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2023). Similarly, a leadership role requiring frequent travel may increase the concern for work-life imbalance and induce reluctance to lead (Lirio, 2014).

For the latter (i.e., perceptions), the context may determine who is perceived as a typical or atypical leader. In certain contexts, atypical individuals may feel discouraged to raise a hand for a leadership role. The established literature on stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and backlash effect (Rudman, 1998) suggests that in contexts favoring typicality in assigning leadership roles (e.g., STEM field in which white men penetrate the leadership positions), individuals from atypical backgrounds (e.g., women, black, disabled) may avert from leadership roles (e.g., Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020). When they are in a leadership role, they may avert from fulfilling the role's requirements. In the case of women, those who feel intimidated by the male-dominated nature of the job or work context may show reluctance to take action in the leadership role, worrying either about confirming the stereotypes (i.e., stereotype threat) or behaving counter-stereotypically (i.e., backlash effect) (e.g.,

Carli & Eagly, 2017). Past research showed that, even in contexts where there is no evidence of systematic resistance to female leadership from followers, the anticipation of such resistance induces reluctance to lead for women (e.g., Li, 2020).

The discussion of the construct so far suggests that RTL may have an intuitively negative connotation. However, we contend that moderate levels of RTL may enhance leader effectiveness (Tussing, 2018). At higher levels of RTL, self-doubt results in indecisiveness and inhibits goal pursuit (e.g., Hooijberg et al., 1997). Those reluctant to lead may experience resistance to accept the leadership title or avoid leadership behaviors, such as showing reservations about taking action and committing to an action, shirking responsibility, or showing slowness in making decisions (e.g., Destradi, 2016; Goodwin, 2020; Tussing, 2018). At lower levels of RTL, an excessive sense of power may result in overconfidence, hubris, and insensitivity toward subordinates (Tussing, 2018). Both the high and low ends of the spectrum would be a liability for organizations. Therefore, moderate levels of reluctance to lead may be a resource for current and future leaders.

2.1. Nomological net of RTL: motivation to lead, worries about leadership, and leadership aspiration

Concepts such as "motivation to lead" (MTL, Chan & Drasgow, 2001), "worries about leadership" (WAL, Aycan & Shelia, 2019), and "leadership aspirations" (LA, Singer, 1991) were introduced as agentic processes in leader emergence to indicate an individual's general attitude toward assuming a formal leadership role. We argue that these concepts are sufficiently different from but can coexist with RTL. Let us first provide the definitions of these constructs (i.e., MTL, WAL, LA), followed by a discussion on the key distinctions of RTL from other constructs.

The earliest among them was leadership aspirations, which entail an interest in and willingness to achieve a leadership position (Singer, 1991). Advancing this concept, Chan and Drasgow (2001) proposed Motivation to lead as an "… individual difference construct that affects a leader's or potential leader's decisions to assume leadership training, roles, and responsibilities and that affect his or her intensity of effort at leading and persistence as a leader" (p. 482). Complementary to MTL, Aycan and Shelia (2019) proposed WAL defined as "… the worries people have about the possible negative consequences of assuming a leadership role." (p. 23).

What are the key distinctions of RTL from other constructs? As stated in detail above, RTL has a more dynamic nature compared to other constructs (MTL, WAL, LA). RTL level tends to change depending on the contextual cues (e.g., life conditions, organizational context, unattractiveness of the benefits and demands of the leadership role). However, MTL, WAL, and LA tend to be relatively more stable (Aycan & Shelia, 2019; Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Singer, 1991). This dynamism of RTL does not necessarily create an aversive situation. It creates room for persuading high-potential individuals with high reluctance to lead to practice leadership roles. The reasoning behind this is that individuals with high reluctance to lead are not firmly fixed in their decision to decline leadership roles or delay action in leadership roles. Given the right intervention, these individuals can change their attitude from reluctance to confidence.

RTL also implies an ambivalent state in which "… a person holds mixed feelings (positive and negative) towards some psychological object." (Gardner, 1987, p. 241). A person with RTL feels interested in pursuing a leadership role but simultaneously feels concerned about assuming it (Tussing, 2018). Being pulled into opposing directions creates an ambivalent state for a reluctant individual in accepting or embracing the role. In contrast, MTL, WAL, and LA involve relatively consistent attitudes (Aycan & Shelia, 2019; Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Singer, 1991), implying either the presence or absence of motivation, worry, or intention for a specific leadership role, respectively. More specifically, a person with high MTL does not experience motivation simultaneously, or a person with high WAL does not experience low worry synchronically. Therefore, while other constructs imply a relatively stable attitude, RTL involves an ambivalent attitude *when making a decision* (e.g., accepting a leadership role or taking an action in the leadership role). The ambivalent and dynamic nature of RTL implies that reluctance can be experienced during decision-making (i.e., ambivalence) and/or across different time spans (i.e., dynamism).

3. Contextual approaches to RTL

While the notion of reluctance to lead is now explored in the literature, the treatment of this concept, as discussed above, has been limited to the disciplinary confines of the social and organizational psychology of leadership. There has been scant exploration of leadership from wider contextual lenses, attending to how context shapes reluctance and willingness to lead. In this section, we responded to the need to explore the interplay between context and reluctance to lead.

3.1. How does context matter?

Context is one of the most frequently used and variably framed terms across disciplines of social sciences, including leadership (Johns, 2006; Oc, 2018). Context gives meaning to social phenomena. The context in social sciences has spatial (e.g., place, geography, location), temporal (e.g., history, future, timeline, lifecycle, and trajectories), cultural (e.g., comparative, international, transnational, national, industrial, and organizational), social (e.g., structures, relationships, transactions, dominance, solidarity, influence), symbolic (e.g., communication, value, respectability, order and ranking), institutional (e.g., process, rules, resources, norms), layered (e.g., macro, meso and micro) and regulatory dimensions (e.g., international, supranational, national, sectoral, social, coercive, legal, voluntary) among others (Chanlat & Özbilgin, 2023). Depending on the dimensions of context selected, social phenomena, such as reluctance to lead (RTL), would gain different meanings.

There are four different research approaches to exploring or ignoring context. In the first approach, context is considered as fixed. Adopting this approach, RTL is considered to exist independent of the context. Most studies on RTL focus on the individual level and explore individual psychological considerations without attending to variations in temporal, spatial, and socio-cultural contexts (e.g., Chon et al., 2020). The second approach involves treating context as fundamental in dynamically shaping RTL. For example, Aggarwal (2009) explores the economic and political context in which the USA takes a reluctant approach to its leadership role in trade liberalization. The third approach is predicated on the assumption that there is an interplay between individual characteristics and context. For example, Burkill (2017) examines reluctance to lead at the nexus of organizational structures and individual agency to explain why academics in a research-intensive university are reluctant to lead. The fourth and less evident approach is underpinned by how reluctance to lead shapes the context. In a macro-national political context, Karp (2018) explains the reluctance to lead that Germany displays in response to the leadership vacuum in Europe relates to its ontological anxiety around national self-narratives of leadership. The research reviewed in this section focuses on the type of context (e.g., temporal, spatial, organizational, socio-cultural). However, it does not reflect the ways in which context is treated (e.g., context as fixed, dynamic), which should be investigated in more detail in future studies.

3.2. The spatial and technological context

Spatial context shapes the boundaries of who is included, welcomed, tolerated, or excluded. The spatial context of leadership could be shaped by material configurations such as the physical arrangement of space (design of furniture, availability of facilities, and conditions of health and safety) and symbolic properties, which render such design ideas

inclusive or exclusive, safe or problematic for certain groups. For example, a boardroom with no access to female toilets presents a problematic space for women. Similarly, a remote and inaccessible leader training facility may become a problematic space for individuals with mobility restrictions (Bunbury, 2009; Özbilgin et al., 2022). Spaces for socialization for leaders (e.g., sports pubs showing football) could also create porous, inclusive, or exclusive practices that lead to reluctance to lead among individuals who are excluded by the design of space.

Safe spaces and inclusive spaces may reduce reluctance to lead for a wider range of individuals. For example, Ely et al. (2011) explain how organizations that provide women identity spaces, namely, symbolic spaces, are created to engage in leadership development, which can help overcome reluctance to lead among women. Hall (1982, 2000) theorizes space as an ethnically and racially marked phenomenon that is variably and historically problematic or safe for multiculturality or whiteness. Leadership happens in spaces marked by relations of power such as gender, ethnicity, and class and constructed by the power elite, namely, white upper-class men, to fit their own conditions of life and leadership.

Regarding the technological context, the development of algorithms, artificial intelligence, robots, and augmented reality, the resultant explosion of e-commerce, and the use of technology to facilitate virtual and hybrid forms of work have radicalized the context of leadership. Much work now happens in virtual or hybrid settings; in many multi-setting organizations, teams and reporting structures are hybridized, and leadership now involves the human-computer interface. These radical shifts bring about new possibilities of leader-follower dynamics and create revised reasons for willingness or reluctance to lead. The emergence of a digital divide discourages individuals without technological skills to lead in virtual and technologically enhanced environments. Further algorithmic systems entrench traditional biases when they go unchecked, harming already vulnerable groups' chances in leadership by bringing in conventional biases in human resource management processes (Vassilopoulou, Kyriakidou, Özbilgin, & Groutsis, 2022). So, the technological context shapes reluctance to lead in new and old ways.

3.3. Organizational context

The spatial and technological elements discussed above are part of the larger organizational context. Surely, the organizational context includes other aspects that are critical for RTL, such as organizational characteristics (e.g., sector, size, life stage, ownership structure), HRM policies and practices (e.g., talent management practices, leadership development programs, work arrangements, diversity and inclusion initiatives), organizational culture (e.g., social support, perceived fairness, toxic culture), and leadership culture (e.g., bottleneck), which we will briefly review in this section.

Organizational characteristics may influence the level of reluctance in current or potential leaders. For example, organizations that are too small or too large may evoke reluctance. Reluctance may be triggered by the lack of human resources in the former and the lack of control over processes in the latter case. Reluctance may also be triggered in organizations operating in risky and highly regulated sectors (e.g., energy, airline) (Peteraf & Reed, 2007). Regarding ownership, being a professional in a family-owned company, for example, entails managing in the shadows of complex family dynamics that elevate reluctance (Revilla et al., 2016). Regarding the life stage, start-ups or organizations going through radical change or restructuring (e.g., mergers and acquisitions) may have more reluctant people to take leadership than those at a more stable growth stage.

Human Resource Management systems and processes can also be important contextual factors in relation to leadership reluctance. Talent assessment and development programs, in particular, play a key role as they determine, to a great extent, the talent pipeline and leadership succession pool the organization can draw from. Common assessment processes often fail to detect reluctant leadership as having high potential (Epitropaki, 2018). Employees usually have to be first championed by their managers in order to be considered for HiPo designation (Finkelstein et al., 2018), and reluctant leaders may be under their managers' radar during the HiPo designation process, or managers may be less likely to advocate for them to be included. Research has also pointed to the limited use of rigorous talent assessment processes in HiPO designation and the susceptibility of these processes to perceptual biases, such as decision-makers' beliefs that "they know potential when they see it" (Finkelstein et al., 2018, p. 6). In some contexts, leadership emergence is formalized and regulated through coercive measures, and certain competencies, ways of selection, emergence, and accountability measures of leaders are asserted by laws or social norms. The regulatory context could render some individuals reluctant while encouraging others to aspire for leadership roles.

Leadership development programs also have an important role to play in strengthening leadership efficacy and overcoming reluctance (e.g., Kwok et al., 2021). Managers need to be aware of leadership self-selection biases and actively encourage reluctant leaders to seek opportunities for leadership development, such as leadership training, leadership transition coaching, and stretching assignments. Inclusive HR practices and inclusive environments where "individuals of all backgrounds - not just members of historically powerful identity groups - are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in core decision--making" (Nishii, 2013, p. 1754) create a fertile context for individuals to overcome reluctance and embrace leadership opportunities. For example, research reveals that initiatives to promote work-life balance enhance women's leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018). Seeing salient leader role models from diverse backgrounds and experiencing inclusive leadership behaviors (Shore et al., 2018) may encourage reluctant leaders from marginalized social groups to step up.

Organizational culture can shape reluctance to lead among individuals. For example, McAllister and Bigley (2002) have demonstrated that a supportive work context, such as organizational support and care, impacts employees' definition of self and self-esteem (by incorporating the appraisal that they are valued and worthy organization members of their self-concept), reducing reluctance to lead among employees. Leadership is perceived as a 'dirty job' in toxic cultures with unethical organizational practices, unfairness towards employees, and nepotism and favoritism (Bedi, 2020). These perceptions may trigger one's reluctance to lead. On the other hand, reluctance to lead can be eased in organizations that have an error management culture (i.e., an organizational culture that promotes learning from errors) (Maurer et al., 2017). Regarding the level of conflict in the organizational culture, a high level of relationship conflict in organizations would induce reluctance to lead (Zhang et al., 2020). Lastly, individuals' fit with organizational culture with respect to values may also play a crucial role in accentuating or attenuating their reluctance to lead (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

3.4. Leadership context

Leadership as a social construct has material and symbolic conditions that motivate members of certain socio-demographic groups more than others. Historically, white, upper-class, heterosexual, able-bodied men have dominated leadership ranks, showing higher levels of motivation to lead as a result. Even when disadvantaged out-group members and atypical leadership candidates show similar motivation to lead, they are treated with the demographic biases that denigrate their atypical and disadvantaged social background, i.e., gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation (Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020). Özcan (2021) explains what he calls the bottleneck hypothesis, which operates in leadership cultures and renders the emergence of leaders from atypical backgrounds as they do not fit with the image of dominant leadership culture in a specific cultural context. There is a considerable backlash against the emergence of typical leaders, and this is a global phenomenon (Saba et al., 2021).

This backlash also could cause reluctance in leaders from atypical backgrounds to show a willingness to lead. In her experimental study, Li (2020) identifies not the gender equality backlash but the anticipation of such backlash causes reluctance to lead among women. Özbilgin et al. (2022) explain that in the case of individuals with disabilities, lack of accommodations and ableist design of workplaces, work processes, cultures, and norms discourage individuals with disabilities from aspiring for leadership positions. In the same vein, Özbilgin and Erbil (2022) explain how heteronormativity and *cis*-normativity of workplaces cause reluctance to lead among LGBTQ + individuals at work. Özbilgin et al. (2023) note that LGBTQ + individuals may withdraw from the leadership contest or remain in the closet to fit the normative expectations of leadership culture.

Samdanis and Özbilgin (2020) explain how atypical leaders from disadvantaged backgrounds experience duality in terms of belonging to a disadvantaged social identity group and the leadership elite that they are joining. This duality renders atypical leaders pioneers, outsiders within, and innovators from the margins. While such a duality may be manageable for some individuals from atypical backgrounds, it may present a challenge for some who view it as irreconcilable. Thus, the image of outsiders within may cause reluctance to lead for some individuals who find their atypicality incongruent with aspirations to lead. Hennekam et al. (2023) explain that individuals with mental illness withdraw from the labor market and do not aspire for leadership positions because they internalize the ableist norms of the labor market they exclude them. Thus, the normative structures of organizations are able to induce reluctance to lead among individuals.

3.5. Socio-cultural and historical context: a focus on europe

Reluctance to lead may be deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and historical context within which organizations operate. Socio-cultural context may include how people engage with time, work, communication, decision-making, authority, and hierarchy in different cultural settings. Therefore, cultural context could shape an individual's willingness and reluctance to lead at the nexus of their self-identity and broader cultural values. The GLOBE study (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) (House et al., 2004) is one of the largest cross-cultural studies that explore the roles of values and practices on leadership and organizational behavior. The study has some dimensions that may impact individuals' reluctance to lead in different cultural contexts. For example, individuals in cultures with low power distance may show reluctance to lead with the fear that their leadership behaviors could be interpreted as aggression or interference with other's work.

Culturally endorsed implicit leadership theory refers to the idea that leadership styles and behaviors are influenced by cultural values and norms (House et al., 2004). In other words, how a leader is expected to behave may vary based on the cultural context in which they operate. The GLOBE study identified six leadership dimensions of cultural prototypes of effective or outstanding leadership (CLTs) in 62 countries, i.e., (a) Charismatic/Value-Based, (b) Team-Oriented, (c) Participative, (d) Humane-Oriented, (e) Autonomous and (f) Self-Protective (House et al., 2004, p. 137). Based on the GLOBE 2004 data,[1] charismatic and team-oriented leadership prototypes are endorsed in all cultural clusters of the world, including Europe. In Europe (e.g., Austria, Finland, Germany, Switzerland), the participative leadership prototype is also highly endorsed (Brodbeck et al., 2000; Meyer, 2014). In this leadership style, soliciting other people's opinions and managing by consensus are common habits of leaders. Current or potential leaders who will operate in such a consensual environment may be more reluctant to set themselves apart from the group since deciding by group agreement is a norm.

[1] https://globeproject.com/results?page_id=country#list.

Similarly, across Europe, high decisiveness is one of the most required characteristics of outstanding leadership (Ashkanasy et al., 2002; Bakasci et al., 2002; Jesuino, 2002; Szabo et al., 2002). However, the expectation of having decisive leaders may put tremendous pressure on the leader or potential leader as the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment they will operate in impedes them to be confident in their decisions. This situation may trigger the leader's or potential leader's RTL with the fear of failure in meeting the followers' expectations. Combining charismatic, team-oriented, and participative leadership can present a challenge and increase reluctance. Leaders are expected to be decisive, visionary, and inspirational while simultaneously participative. Being charismatic and decisive (e.g., the ability to make decisions quickly and effectively) may be at odds with encouraging participation and empowering teams. This balancing act may induce reluctance for European leaders.

So far, we have focused on the European region as a whole. Nonetheless, there are distinct differences between the clusters (i.e., Latin, Germanic, Nordic, Eastern, Anglo) across Europe, which may ease or trigger RTL levels among individuals. Brodbeck et al. (2000), for example, analyzed a subset of the GLOBE data collected in 22 European countries and found leadership prototypes to differ among the five clusters of European countries (Anglo, Nordic, Germanic, Latin and Eastern) and further identified a new cluster comprising Poland and Slovenia (Central Europe). For example, in Sweden (Nordic European cluster) and Austria (Germanic cluster), there is a higher expectation for effective leaders to be charismatic and inspirational than in France (Latin European cluster). Thus, individuals who do not view themselves as charismatic may be less reluctant to step up to leadership in France (due to lack of fit with the ideal prototype) versus in Austria. Along similar lines, leaders are expected to be more team-oriented in Poland (Central European cluster) and Greece (Eastern European cluster) than in Germany (Germanic European cluster) and Russia (Eastern European cluster). Thus, individuals with team integrator characteristics may be more likely to experience RTL in the last two countries.

Furthermore, in the Germanic cluster (i.e., Austria, Germany, Switzerland), where there is an essential influence of unionization and prevalence of the concept of co-determination, the leader or potential leader may have more RTL due to their considerably less individual power in the decision-making processes (Szabo et al., 2002). Specifically, in Germany, the concept of co-determination requires a two-tiered management structure in which the representatives of the employer and the labor side equally take part on the supervisory board and decide together on strategic issues such as mergers and acquisitions, plant closures, and so on (Szabo et al., 2002). Only in deadlock situations, management can overrule the labor side (Szabo et al., 2002). This pressure on building consensus as part of the decision-making process may induce RTL. Likewise, in Eastern (i.e., Albania, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Poland, Russia, and Slovenia) and Latin (i.e., Spain, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, France, and Israel) European clusters, the presence of strong institutional collectivism that rewards collective action and downplays individual achievement, may increase RTL and refrain leader or potential leader from standing out against others (Bakasci et al., 2002; Jesuino, 2002).

Individuals may feel more reluctant to lead in the Nordic cluster (i.e., Denmark, Finland, and Sweden), where there is a strong emphasis on an egalitarian leadership style and low hierarchical levels (Meyer, 2014). The Danish executive can best describe the egalitarian structure of the organizations: "In Denmark, it is understood that the managing director is one of the guys, just two small steps up from the janitor" (Meyer, 2014, p. 136). In these egalitarian societies, since the perceived leadership rewards (e.g., power, status) are higher than the perceived leadership risks (i.e., responsibility for failure, work-life imbalance), individuals who contemplate the aftermath of a leadership role may feel more reluctant. They may also anticipate a higher image risk (i.e., the expectation that taking a certain action will negatively impact how others perceive them) about taking up leadership roles due to their fear

of being seen as arrogant by others, which in turn increases their reluctance to lead (Cunningham et al., 2022).

Leadership may be regarded symbolically differently. It could be denigrated in some settings and valorized in others. The symbolic context of leadership shapes whether individuals consider leadership a prized or penalized path. If leadership is not valorized, individuals may show more reluctance to lead. In some cultures, voice behavior is suppressed, and silence is endorsed (Erbil & Özbilgin, 2023). In such cultural settings, taking up leadership at the group and organizational level could be discouraged. The theory of spirals of silence posits that in cultural contexts where violence is normalized, individuals become more silent (Camgoz et al., 2023; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Thus, in contexts with totalitarian, undemocratic cultural traditions and abusive and toxic leadership practices, individuals may avert from leadership with the fear of reprisal.

Temporal context, as in history, time, expectations of the future, lifecycle, and trajectories of leadership, could shape reluctance and willingness to lead among individuals. For example, in some contexts, leadership is historically anchored to certain events involving leaders who lead the followers out of hardship or to complete destruction. Thus, the historical context of leadership leaves imprints that inform reluctance or willingness to lead. For example, in contexts with traumatic examples of leadership, individuals may remain reluctant to lead. Karp (2018) notes of Nazi past Germany as a historical point from which reluctance to lead emanates. Individuals also consider the temporal context of leading for their lives. For example, what leadership could bring and take away, what trajectory could be expected of a leader in terms of choices and chances, and the lifecycle of leadership could encourage or discourage individuals with different expectations, resources, competencies, and conditions of work and life.

4. Conclusions and future directions

How can someone have hesitations to accept a leadership position? How can a leader have hesitations to exercise leadership in his/her role? At the outset, reluctance in the leadership realm appears rare and has a negative connotation if it exists. In this paper, we reflected on the prevalence and utility of an understudied construct called 'reluctance to lead' (RTL), arguing that it is not rare and does not necessarily imply an undesirable state. We scrutinized and expanded the existing conceptualizations of this construct and discussed the role of context in shaping it.

We defined RTL as the hesitation of a high-potential individual to accept the leadership position or exercise leadership when s/he is in the leadership role. Our conceptualization of RTL is built on the existing definitions (Epitropaki, 2018). We argue that reluctance may occur both before and after the leadership position is held. In other words, the construct is relevant to candidates (potential leaders) and current leaders. We also argue that the construct is dynamic in nature, and its level can change depending on the context. In this paper, we focused on organizational and societal-level contexts. Organizational context involves organizational characteristics (e.g., size, industry), technology-enabled work, spatial arrangements, HRM policies and practices, organizational culture, and prevailing leadership culture. Societal-level context includes historical, demographic, and cultural characteristics of countries (esp., Europe).

There are several exciting research avenues for future studies on RTL. First, future studies should develop a validated measure of RTL to be used by scientists and practitioners. So far, there has been only one empirical study on RTL (Tussing, 2018), which utilized a subset of items based on motivation to lead (e.g., Amit et al., 2007; Chan & Drasgow, 2001). However, a dedicated measure capturing the core of the RTL construct is sorely needed. The newly developed measure will also allow researchers to examine RTL's commonalities and differences with the worries about leadership (WAL) and motivation to lead (MTL) constructs in the RTL nomological network.

Second, future research should focus on emancipatory aims such as easing reluctance to lead for unjustly discouraged groups of individuals. In our paper, we noted that marginalized, disadvantaged, excluded, and discriminated against groups would show more reluctance to lead as their social demographic backgrounds are often viewed as incongruent with leadership. There is an intersectionality of privilege in leadership positions (Kamasak et al., 2020). White, male, upper-class, heterosexual, able-minded, and able-bodied individuals dominate leadership positions, and the leadership positions are designed to fit with the normative standards of this group of intersectionality-privileged individuals. There is a life cycle of discrimination from childhood to late life experiences that discourages individuals from certain marginalized backgrounds from aspiring for leadership positions. Future research should offer several approaches to easing RTL for disadvantaged groups. Individual- and organizational-level intervention programs should be developed, and their effectiveness should be tested. The aim of these programs should not necessarily be minimizing RTL but optimizing it for effective leader outcomes (see our discussion on the curvilinear relationship between RTL and leader effectiveness).

Third, future studies should investigate the manifestations, prevalence, and outcomes of RTL experienced by leaders in their current roles. Possible manifestations of RTL may include slowness and hesitation in decision-making, delegation of responsibility to others, noncommitment to goal-oriented action, and humility (e.g., downplaying the leadership title). At first glance, such enactments of reluctance may appear to render ineffectiveness in leadership. However, recent literature suggests that humility, delegation, and deliberation before taking action are characteristics of empowering leaders (Ahearne et al., 2005; Cheong et al., 2019; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). A fruitful research avenue is to examine the circumstances under which RTL is associated with effective and ineffective organizational and employee-related (e.g., employee engagement) outcomes. Regarding the prevalence of RTL, it is important to investigate the differences between typical and atypical leaders. Previous research on leadership aspirations suggests that RTL may be more experienced by women, disabled, and ethnically diverse individuals (Anderson et al., 2020; Fektekjian et al., 2014).

Finally, we argued that RTL is dynamic in nature. Its level can be influenced by various contextual factors at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. It would be wrong to assume that personality (e.g., neuroticism) is the only factor determining the extent to which an individual experiences reluctance to lead. The role of context and the interaction between individual-difference variables (e.g., personality, demographic characteristics) and context should be carefully investigated. We cannot disregard how country-level historical and sociocultural context accentuates or attenuates RTL.

While organizations overlook reluctant individuals as lacking confidence and competence in leadership, confident-appearing individuals with no hesitation to accept leadership roles may wrongly emerge as good leaders. One of the reasons for wrong people to over-emerge may be that right people under-emerge (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). This signals the need to expand the pool from which leaders are selected. To expand the talent pool and include atypical leaders, we may need to pay closer attention to individuals who shy away from leadership roles. Having explored reluctance to lead from different lenses, we may ask two critical questions: If we are to ease reluctance to lead, how should this be done? Whose responsibility should this be? Reluctance to lead is a relational phenomenon that emerges in interplay with the context. Therefore, any attempt at easing reluctance to lead needs to attend to both micro-individual, meso-organizational, and macro-societal conditions.

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