Reports

Benevolently bowing out: the influence of self-construals and leadership performance on the willful relinquishing of power

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H I G H L I G H T S

- We examine the effect of people and situations on the relinquishing of power.
- We examine the willful relinquishing of power in a simulated group task.
- Highly interdependent people give up more power when leadership performance is poor.
- Highly interdependent people give up power when performance is solely their own.
- Results suggest that people and situations influence the relinquishing of power.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Sometimes a group's best interest is served when powerful people relinquish power, but little theory or empirical research has investigated when and by whom power is willingly given-up. Using a simulated, online team competition, two studies demonstrated that people who were dispositionally high in interdependent self-construals were more likely to relinquish their position of leadership within a group when they perceived that their leadership performance on the task was unambiguously poor versus good. However, when given the ability to attribute performance to others rather than the self, leader's level of interdependent self-construal did not significantly influence their decisions to relinquish power. Overall, these findings suggest that factors such as perceived leadership performance, interdependent self-construals, and ability to defer blame all converge when making decisions in regards to how much power should be relinquished.

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"…no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship…The object of power is power."

[–George Orwell's *1984* (1949/2007, p. 263)]

Introduction

There has been widespread belief that power corrupts and there are numerous examples of coups that have been staged and wars that have been fought in efforts to secure and retain power. This social reality has inspired a large literature examining the adverse consequences of having power. For instance, the experience of power often leads to aggression (Fast & Chen, 2009; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012), exploitation

(Winter & Barenbaum, 1985), stereotyping (Fiske, 1993; Vescio, Gervais, Heidenreich, & Snyder, 2006; Vescio, Snyder, & Butz, 2003), patronizing behavior (Vescio, Gervais, Snyder, & Hoover, 2005), and a reliance on category-based social cues that deindividuate and marginalize others (Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000). Interestingly, the assumed corruptive influence of power is so widespread among scholars, social commentators, and lay people that, despite striking upheaval across the Middle-East, observers found it relatively unremarkable that leaders from Libya's Muammar Gaddafi to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad fought to maintain their grasp on power.

Importantly, however, there are historical instances of leaders who have voluntarily relinquished power and authority for the collective good. For instance, Lucius Cincinnatus was called to serve as emperor of Rome in response to an invasion and immediately relinquished power at the end of the crisis. By voluntarily passing absolute power for the common good, Cincinnatus cemented himself as an outstanding example of benevolent leadership and civic virtue. Likewise, with a focus on the greater good, George Washington stepped away from the Presidency after two terms despite calls from supporters to be America's first king.

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The goal of the current work was to examine the interpersonal characteristics and situational factors that facilitate the voluntary relinquishing of power. Although there is a rich psychological literature investigating the conceptualization, acquisition, and consequences of power (see Blader & Chen, 2012; Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), little theory or empirical research has investigated when and by whom power is relinquished (e.g., Strube, Berry, & Moergen, 1985). The present theory and research builds on findings showing that people who are high (vs. low) in power are adept at goal setting and particularly able to focus and act on goals, while inhibiting attention to competing demands (for a review, see Guinote, 2007). Importantly, however, power granted to leaders brings with it the challenge and responsibility to balance the tension of two inherent competing goals: using power to serve egoistic goals or advance collectivistic goals (Vescio & Guinote, 2010). Therefore, to consider when and by whom power may be relinquished, we adopted a person × situation approach (Lewin, 1951) as we considered three questions: (1) what is power? (2) what kind of people prioritize collectivist goals over egoistic goals? and (3) what situations cue the relinquishing of power for the common good? Below we review theory and research of relevance to attempt to answer these questions, which provide the basis for the hypotheses of the present research.

What is power? Traditionally and most frequently, power has been defined in social influence terms. As such, power refers to one's ability to influence others in psychologically meaningful ways (French & Raven, 1959) and control outcomes of importance to others by the giving or withholding valued resources (Fiske, 1993; Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Although there have been debates about whether power differentials originate as a result of force or based on the consensual giving of power to those perceived as capable of forwarding the goals of a collective, Boehm and Flack (2010) have noted that once established, power is most typically and frequently maintained through legitimacy (cf. Jackman, 1994). Consistent with this perspective, findings emerging from the study of actual groups show that power is often granted to those who are seen as sociable and acting in a group's best interest (Keltner, Gruenfeld, Galinsky, & Kraus, 2010), such that power is bestowed upon those perceived as equipped and motivated to facilitate the group goals and reduce uncertainty. In addition, primates that are low in power (both human and non-human) form collations to protect themselves from abuses of power (Boehm & Flack, 2010). Together, these findings are consistent with the notion that authority is granted from followers to leaders, serving as an implicit social contract whereby followers give up resources in exchange for a collectivisticly-focused leader (Mead & Maner, 2012).

What kind of people prioritize collectivistic goals over egoistic goals? As noted, powerful people are adept at goal setting (Guinote, 2007), but powerful people must also balance the tension between competing egoistic goals and collectivistic goals (Vescio & Guinote, 2010). As is often the case when people are faced with conflicting beliefs, the tension between competing egoistic goals and collectivistic goals may be appeased if powerful people are particularly responsive to cues that prioritize one goal over the other. Consistent with this notion, findings suggest that powerful people are attentive to both situational factors and internal dispositions that heighten the salience of either egoistic goals or collectivistic goals. For instance, powerful people exhibit more goal-oriented action than do low power people, both taking more from a common pool of resources when egoistic goals are normative in a situation and giving more to a common pool of resources when collectivistic goals are normative (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003).

In the absence of strong situational pressures, powerful people tend to act in line with their internal dispositions (e.g., Guinote, Weick, & Cai, 2012), which can influence whether egoistic or collectivistic goals are pursued (Blader & Chen, 2012; Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001; Maner & Mead, 2010). In many cases in which people are bestowed power

for the collective good (Boehm & Flack, 2010), power holders often act in socially responsible ways (Overbeck & Park, 2001). In this initial consideration of the relinquishing of power, we examined the possibility that people who are chronically focused on collectivistic goals are more likely to relinquish power in the face of unambiguous evidence that one is not advancing group goals. To explore this novel possibility, we focused on internal dispositions that would affect the degree to which people are collectivisticly goal-focused; namely, interdependent and independent self-construals, or self-construals that differ in terms of their chronic accessible collectivistic motives (i.e., social connectedness) and egoistic motives (i.e., individual uniqueness), respectively (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Consistent with this notion, findings indicate that people with interdependent self-construals are more likely to adopt the perspective of others (Sheldon & Johnson, 1993) and be motivated to pursue the goals of close others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In addition, when people with interdependent self-construals hold power they are less likely to be unfair toward others (Blader & Chen, 2012) and they tend to act more benevolently when resolving disputes with low-power competitors (Howard, Gardner, & Thompson, 2007). Taken together, the foregoing points suggest that, when in positions of power, people with high interdependent self-construals may be more likely than people who are low on interdependent self-construals to relinquish power if relinquishing power is perceived as advancing the common good.

What situations cue the relinquishing of power for the common good? Following a person × situation approach, we assume certain situations might cue the need to relinquish power for the common good and that these situations may exert a more influential press on interdependently-oriented people who are chronically focused on collectivistic goals. For instance, any situational feature that suggests an unambiguous failure to advance the collective goals may provide important information to people who prioritize collectivistic goals. Thus, if people experiencing power are driven to act in a manner that achieves group goals (Guinote, 2007), then situational indicators that signal the failure to meet these demands (e.g., poor leadership performance) might be a cue to interdependently-oriented leaders that their leadership is ineffective and that power needs to be transferred to someone more equipped to solve current problems.

Experiment 1

On the basis of the foregoing logic, the current research tested the prediction that interdependently-focused leaders who are presented with evidence of poor leadership performance would be more likely to relinquish power. We predicted that this would only occur when feedback on leadership performance was poor since people would not have a reason to willfully give up power when they are doing well and meeting group goals. Experiment 1 tested the hypothesis that people with high (vs. low) interdependent self-construals will be more likely to relinquish power when provided with unambiguous evidence that their performance as a leader is failing to advance collectivistic goals (vs. ambiguous, good).

Method

Participants and design

Eighty-eight undergraduates of the Pennsylvania State University (74 women, $M_{Age} = 19.1$ years) participated for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to good leadership performance, ambiguous leadership performance, or poor leadership performance conditions.

Procedure and materials

Participants came into the lab in groups of three to five, but worked at individual computer stations. Before the experiment