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Blind in one eye: How psychological ownership of ideas affects the types of suggestions people adopt

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ABSTRACT

Two experimental studies demonstrated that feeling as though an object, such as an idea, is "ours" (i.e., experiencing feelings of psychological ownership) propels people to selectively adopt others' suggestions for change. Whereas feelings of ownership caused individuals to embrace the adoption of suggestions that expanded upon their possessions (additive change), it simultaneously made them shun the adoption of suggestions that shrank them (subtractive change) (Studies 1 and 2). Furthermore, results indicated that both a sense of personal loss and negative affect sequentially mediated this joint effect of psychological ownership and change type on the adoption of others' suggestions for change (Study 2). Our findings suggest that the nature of change and how it impacts high ownership people's sense of loss and negative affect is an important determinant of whether feelings of ownership will cause individuals to remain open to or resist others' suggestions for change.

Introduction

Making important decisions, solving difficult problems, or developing new products or services all require that people revise or otherwise change their opinions, solutions, or ideas in response to the suggestions and comments they receive from their colleagues, customers, etc. (e.g., Gino & Schweitzer, 2008; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). The ability to adapt to changes in one's (informational) environment is of particular importance given the enhanced need in contemporary organizations to collaborate, often with people of different backgrounds and of different perspectives or viewpoints (Page, 2007; Sawyer, 2007). While in some situations individuals seem to embrace others' feedback and spare no personal expense in adapting their work to incorporate the inputs they receive, in other situations people seem to resist such efforts outright.

Although people may have many reasons to embrace or resist others' inputs, one concept that seems to be particularly suited to examine this issue but that has received relatively limited attention to date is the notion of psychological ownership (e.g., Dirks, Cummings, & Pierce, 1996). People are known to generate strong bonds to the material or nonmaterial objects (e.g., decisions, solutions, ideas, prototypes, etc.) they create or develop. In fact, research suggests that creating an object is one of the most powerful means of generating psychological ownership—a state wherein people feel as though an object, or part of it, is theirs (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001, 2003; Pierce, O'Driscoll, & Coghlan, 2004; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). Previous work points to a variety of benefits associated with ownership, including increased commitment and effort devoted to the target of ownership (e.g., O'Driscoll, Pierce, & Coghlan, 2006). Yet, at the same time, feelings of ownership may also lead one to experience a need to "mark" and "defend" the object (Brown, Lawrence, & Robinson, 2005). Applied to the above question, this research suggests that psychological ownership may provide the impetus for individuals to actively cultivate their work and, as a result, welcome attempts by others to shape it. On the other hand, psychological ownership may also cause people to feel a need to "protect" their opinions, thoughts, or ideas and, as a consequence, to reject attempts by others to shape them.

Unfortunately, we know very little about the conditions that determine when psychological ownership may cause individuals to embrace change and to remain receptive to others' inputs or to resist such efforts thereby rejecting suggestions for change. We propose that one factor that may regulate whether ownership will result in the adoption or rejection of others' contributions is the nature of these change efforts (Dirks et al., 1996). Specifically,

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we contend that whether others are trying to shape one's work by (1) diminishing it (subtractive change) or (2) building upon it (additive change) determines how people with varying levels of psychological ownership will respond to these change attempts.

Although previous theory has highlighted the potential for psychological ownership to determine individuals' openness or resistance to change (Dirks et al., 1996), no prior work has empirically investigated the complex interplay between psychological ownership *and* change type on the adoption of change. Our study fills this important gap in the literature. Specifically, in the present study we examine ownership of people's *ideas* and how such ownership propels people to adopt or reject others' suggestions for change, depending on whether such change is subtractive or additive in nature. Our focus on people's ideas seems to be particularly timely and relevant, given that many countries, including the US are in the process of becoming "creative economies" (Florida, 2002; Howkins, 2002). In addition, we decided to test our arguments in a distributed collaboration environment given the prevalence of such environments in contemporary organizations (Keisler & Hinds, 2002).

Background and hypothesis development

Psychological ownership

Consistent with previous research, we define psychological ownership "as the state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership or a piece of that target is 'theirs' (i.e., 'It is *mine*!')" (Pierce et al., 2003, p. 86). At the conceptual core of the state of ownership is a sense of possession of a particular target (e.g., the results of one's labor, such as an idea or an artistic creation) and of being psychologically tied to that target. In other words, psychological ownership reflects a relationship between a person and an object (material or nonmaterial) in which the object of ownership is experienced as being closely connected to the self, that is being part of the *extended self* (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992). In essence, psychological ownership provides the answer to the question "What do I feel is mine?"

Feelings of ownership can develop for a variety of objects, both material *and* nonmaterial. So long as an object allows important needs, such as the need to feel efficacious or competent to operate and to be satisfied (Dirks et al., 1996; Pierce et al., 2003), feelings of ownership are bound to emerge. Indeed, Brown and Robinson (2011) showed that individuals feel ownership over a wide range of targets including both material (e.g., products, workspaces, etc.) and nonmaterial (e.g., ideas, roles, etc.) objects and exhibit similar responses involving these objects. In addition, feelings of ownership can emerge in a variety of ways. Research on the mere ownership effect, for example, has demonstrated that simply being randomly associated with a material (Beggan, 1992) or a nonmaterial object, such as a set of arguments (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005) can be enough to elicit feelings of ownership and the self-enhancing biases that are operative when possessions become part of our extended self. Be it via simple association, through the investment of time and effort into an object, or by having the opportunity to control it (e.g., Pierce et al., 2003), feelings of ownership are ubiquitous and can have some important implications.

What, then, are the consequences of individuals being psychologically tied to a set of ideas? Previous research suggests that people with strong bonds to their psychological possessions are likely to experience a sense of responsibility and concern for them (Dipboye, 1977; Korman, 1970) and, in turn, a need to care for and nurture them. Thus, when individuals feel as though a set of ideas is truly theirs, they are likely to invest time and energy into cultivating it, for example, by considering and adopting others' suggestions for changing these ideas. According to this logic, then, a sense of ownership may propel individuals to be open to others' suggestions for change. Consistent with these arguments, ownership of various targets, such as one's job, work group, or organization has been shown to positively relate to a number of outcomes reflecting people's concern for and desire to invest in their possessions, such as commitment, citizenship behaviors, and improvement attempts (O'Driscoll et al., 2006; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004; Vandewalle, Van Dyne, & Kostova, 1995; Wagner, Parker, & Christiansen, 2003), and to negatively relate to outcomes reflecting a lack of responsibility, such as workplace deviance (Avey, Avolio, Crossley, & Luthans, 2009).

In contrast to the perspective that psychological ownership primarily has beneficial effects, Brown et al. (2005) cautioned that feelings of ownership might also have a "dark side," causing individuals to engage in protective behaviors directed toward the target of ownership. For example, individuals may resist sharing their ideas with their colleagues in an attempt to hide or hoard them (Brown & Robinson, 2007; Webster et al., 2008) or, even if the ideas are shared, may want to retain exclusive control over them, resulting in the rejection of others' attempts to contribute to them (Choi & Levine, 2004; Pierce, Jussila, & Cummings, 2009). Applied to the context of the present research, this implies that psychological ownership may lead individuals to reject others' efforts at refining their ideas thereby becoming resistant to others' change attempts.

Given the potential for psychological ownership both to promote openness and resistance to others' change attempts, it is essential to identify the conditions that regulate whether or not people with ownership of their ideas are likely to adopt or reject other's feedback. It is to the discussion of these moderating forces that we now turn.

Moderating effects of change type

Consistent with previous theoretical work (Dirks et al., 1996), we distinguish between change that shrinks people's possessions (subtractive change) and change that expands upon them (additive change) and suggest that this distinction has important implications for our understanding of when individuals with varying levels of ownership will adopt or reject others' suggestions for change. For the purpose of the present research, we define subtractive change as those contributions that aim at refining a person's ideas by eliminating certain aspects of them. We define additive change as those contributions that aim at refining an individual's ideas by building upon or extending them. It is important to note that subtractive and additive change can both be of equal value—it may be as important to identify aspects of an object, such as an idea, that are flawed as it is to enhance those aspects that are strong suits. Thus, although the terms subtractive and additive might have certain connotations attached to them (e.g., negative versus positive), both can be useful types of change.

How will change that is subtractive or additive in nature impact the effects of psychological ownership on the adoption of such suggestions? As noted earlier, at the core of psychological ownership is the feeling of possessiveness and of being psychologically tied to an object with the result that the object is considered part of the extended self. Beggan (1992), for example, suggested and showed that material possessions can easily become part of the extended self and, as a result, are prone to the same self-enhancing biases as the core self. In a series of three experiments, he demonstrated that participants rated a material object (e.g. cold drink insulator) more favorably simply because they owned it—an effect termed the *mere ownership effect*. De Dreu and van Knippenberg (2005) showed that the mere ownership effect also applied to nonmaterial objects, such as arguments and attitudes. Indeed, in a series of four experiments