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(Still) waiting in the wings: Group-based biases in leaders' decisions about to whom power is relinquished

Nathaniel J. Ratcliff *, Theresa K. Vescio, Julia L. Dahl

The Pennsylvania State University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine leadership decision-making related to relinquishing power.
- We examine when and to whom power is willfully relinquished.
- Leaders are more likely to relinquish power to White co-workers (vs. Black).
- Leaders are more likely to relinquish power to male co-workers (vs. female).
- Results suggest that group-based biases exist in relinquishing power decisions.

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ABSTRACT

This research examined whether leaders exhibit race-based and gender-based biases in decisions about to whom to relinquish power. Across three studies, participants were placed in leadership roles in a simulated, online competition with either White male and/or Black male co-workers (Study 1a/1b) or White male and White female co-workers (Study 2). Results showed that after learning of their poor performance as leaders, participants relinquished more power to White male co-workers than Black male co-worker and more power to White male co-workers than White female co-workers. Together, the findings offer a novel examination of when and to whom power is given which can further inform our understanding of the underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups in leadership domains.

Relinquishing power refers to the voluntary sharing, transfer, or abdication of one's influence (French & Raven, 1959) or control (Fiske, 1993; Fiske & Dépret, 1996) to another person or group. To relinquish power is to simultaneously *reduce one's own power* while increasing another's. Moreover, power can be relinquished in various degrees, ranging from decisions to share power by including another in leadership authority (e.g., co-leader, oligarchy) to the full abdication of power (e.g., resignation), which gives others power over the self. Of importance, since leaders are often conferred power under the presumption that they will forward group goals (Keltner et al., 2010), relinquishing power provides a means by which leaders, who are not meeting group goals, can peacefully transfer power rather than hinder their group. Thus, relinquishing power serves a critical social function, permitting non-contentious transfers of power for the good of the group. In fact, without a means to smoothly transfer power, groups could become unsuccessful under an ineffective leader and/or fracture when leaders are no longer perceived as legitimate authority figures.

The goal of this work is to examine whether leaders exhibit race-based and gender-based (i.e., group-based) biases in decisions about *to whom* to relinquish power. Specifically, extending prior work documenting when power is relinquished (see Ratcliff & Vescio, 2013), we suggest that leaders who are not meeting group goals (e.g., performing poorly) will be motivated to relinquish power, but unlikely to give power to members of historically disadvantaged groups.

Relinquishing power

Power is relinquished when leaders are confronted with a situation in which continued leadership would not advance salient group goals (Ratcliff & Vescio, 2013). For instance, after serving two presidential terms, George Washington relinquished power to set a precedent that would assure democracy. More recently, Pope Benedict XVI became the first pope in over 600 years to step down from the papacy, citing the collective good of the church as the basis for his decision. Consistent with this notion, experimental research shows that leaders are more likely to relinquish power after learning of their objective poor performance (vs. good performance) as leaders and when focused

* Corresponding author at: Psychology Department, The Pennsylvania University, University Park, PA 16802, USA.
E-mail address: njr5139@psu.edu (N.J. Ratcliff).

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on group over individual goals (i.e., interdependent self-construal; see Singelis, 1994). However, the question of *to whom* power is relinquished has yet to be addressed.

To whom might power be relinquished?

We predict race-biases and gender-biases in decisions about to whom to relinquish power. This prediction derives from two foundational assumptions. First, we assume that when leaders relinquish power for the good of the group, they are motivated to give power to those perceived to be capable of and motivated (e.g., competent, well-intentioned) to further group goals. This assumption is consistent with research showing that power is given to those who are perceived as able and motivated to forward group goals (Boehm & Flack, 2010; Keltner et al., 2010). Moreover, decisions about to whom power is relinquished should be particularly marked by attempts to maximize confidence that one is giving power to capable and well-intentioned others because those others will have power over the self. Second, deriving from the stereotyping and intergroup relations literatures (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Fiske, 1998, 2010), we assume these perceptions of capability and motivation are cued by social group membership. This assumption is consistent with several lines of research that converge to show that members of historically disadvantaged groups often are perceived as lacking capability and/or motivation, the targets of bias, viewed as poor leaders, and are underrepresented in positions of power.

Perceptions that disadvantaged groups lack ability and motivation often lead to bias. The relative status of a group cues perceptions of the abilities and competencies of that group (e.g., Berger & Fişek, 2006; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001); members of high-status groups are presumed to have the requisite competence to have earned their group status, whereas members of disadvantaged groups (i.e., low-status racial minorities and women) are perceived as lacking competence or ability. Perceptions of the ability and/or motivational shortcomings of disadvantaged groups, in turn, often predict judgmental biases and discrimination in the classroom (e.g., Aronson & Steele, 2005) and the workplace (e.g., Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012).

Of importance, perceptions that disadvantaged group members lack ability and motivation also lead to biases in leadership contexts, such that for members of disadvantaged groups, leadership is both elusive and precarious once obtained. Compared to White men, who are frequently regarded as the prototype for leadership roles (see Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008), Blacks and women are stereotyped in ways that imply a lack of fit for leadership positions (see Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Livingston & Pearce, 2009). For instance, stereotypes of women (e.g., communal, warm, kind) are incongruent with the agentic characteristics needed to succeed as a leader (e.g., competent, self-confident, independent; see Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Dominant group members (e.g., Whites and men) also prefer that disadvantaged groups remain in subordinate positions and express discomfort when members of disadvantaged groups hold positions of power (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Knight, Hebl, Foster, & Mannix, 2003). As a consequence, compared to White men, Blacks and women are less likely to be hired or promoted into leadership roles, are given less authority, make less money, and are underrepresented in the most valued domains in society (e.g., STEM domains and leadership positions, Cundiff, Vescio, Loken, & Lo, 2013; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Livingston & Pearce, 2009; National Science Foundation, 2010; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010, 2012). Furthermore, even when Blacks and women overcome obstacles and obtain leadership positions, they experience additional prejudice and bias (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 1991, 2002; Knight et al., 2003), open acts of sabotage and hostility (e.g., Berdahl, 2007; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman et al., 2012), and are quickly dismissed and discredited at the first sign of faltering leadership (e.g., Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

In sum, cursory perceptions that disadvantage groups lack ability and/or motivation have been well-documented to lead to bias in many leadership contexts (e.g., hiring and promotion). Of importance, however, this work aims to document whether similar biases toward disadvantaged groups exist in the novel context of relinquishing power.

Relinquishing power as a novel context for studying group-based bias

Relinquishing power can be distinguished from other behaviors of powerholders (e.g., hiring and promotion) that have garnered much attention in the stereotyping and prejudice literatures because from the perspective of powerholders, relinquishing power has a zero-sum nature. To relinquish power means that another is gaining power from a position of leadership or authority in direct inverse to the magnitude of power one is losing. Stated differently, in hiring and promotion contexts, decisions are typically made by people—individually or as groups—who have authority (e.g., dean, board of trustees) and who continue to hold power following a hiring or promotion decision. By contrast, relinquishing power introduces the possibility that a subordinate could become a peer or one's superior, directly shifting one's personal power to another. Therefore, relinquishing power carries the personal cost of reducing one's control of outcomes and introduces potential risks (e.g., the impediment of goals) that vary as a function of the perceived capability and motivation of the successor. Moreover, when deciding to whom to relinquish power, a leader's personal outcomes are directly tied to their decision; a poor decision about to whom to give power could impede goal striving and be costly.

The present research

This work examined whether there were race- and gender-biases in leaders' decisions about to whom power was relinquished. Across studies, students participated in lab simulations where they believed that they were leaders of a group working together via computer facilitated interactions with the possibility of earning $25.00 in a team competition (cf. Ratcliff & Vescio, 2013). After being presented with information about their performance as leaders (good or poor quality), the race of male co-workers was manipulated in Studies 1a and 1b and the gender of White co-workers was manipulated in Study 2. This allowed us to examine whether people motivated to achieve the group goal (i.e., monetary rewards) were less likely to relinquish power to members of historically disadvantaged groups (i.e., Black men, White women) than White male co-workers.

Studies 1a and 1b

Method

Participants

Participants in Study 1a were 73 undergraduates of The Pennsylvania State University, who participated in return for course credit (48 women, 25 men, $M_{Age} = 19.29$, self-reported ethnicity: 57 White, 5 Black, 7 Asian, 3 Hispanic, 1 undefined). Participants in Study 1b were 108 undergraduates of The Pennsylvania State University, who participated in return for course credit (94 women, 14 men, $M_{Age} = 18.69$, self-reported ethnicity: 91 White, 5 Black, 10 Asian, 1 Hispanic, 1 undefined). In Study 1a and 1b, participants who responded to relinquishing power options too quickly to have reasonably considered the decision (<1.5 SD below mean; 5.53 s and 10.31 s, respectively) were not included in the analyses ($n = 5$ and $n = 3$, respectively).