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When and why leaders put themselves first: Leader behaviour in resource allocations as a function of feeling entitled

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Abstract

In this article, we examine how being assigned the role of leader affects behaviour in resource sharing tasks. Previous research has shown that group members anchor their decision on the equal division rule prescribing that resources should be distributed equally. Following notions of equity theory and the literature on role schemas, we expected that adherence to the equal division rule would be moderated by role assignment. In particular, we expected leaders to take more than followers from a common resource and that this effect would be explained in terms of feelings of entitlement. The results of two experimental studies corroborate this reasoning. Study 1 demonstrated that leaders took more than followers and that leaders deviated more strongly from the equal division rule. In Study 2, it was found that legitimate leaders took more from the resource and deviated more strongly from the equal division rule than non-legitimate leaders. Additional analyses suggest that the leaders' tendency to make higher allocations to the self can be explained by feelings of entitlement. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Most of us will have noticed that in the last few years, newspapers have frequently published articles about the exorbitant salaries of top managers in both European and US companies. A common conclusion is that leaders and those in power positions unfairly benefit themselves at the expense of the interests of others (a process that leaders often prefer to keep silent about, see Elvira, 2001; Perlow & Williams, 2003). Moreover, it has been argued that the resulting inequality is detrimental to the collective interest (Aquino & Reed, 1998). From the perspective of social psychology this observation is important, because it suggests that unfair distributions may ultimately spell disaster for a group or organization. An important task within groups or organizations is to allocate common, but mostly finite, resources to its members (Mannix, 1993), and as such people may find themselves in a mixed-motive situation in which their personal interests are in conflict with the interests of others (Komorita

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& Parks, 1994). If under such circumstances people strive largely to further their own interests (particularly those who hold power), then the collective welfare is likely to suffer (Dawes, 1980).

To address these issues, it is important to examine whether leaders are indeed more motivated to pursue their own interests at the expense of the collective interest, and to determine the factors that contribute to this motivation to put their own interests first. In the present article, we set out to investigate these questions by examining whether leaders take more from a collective resource than do followers, and whether this allocation deviates from the commonly accepted fairness rule of equality (i.e. the notion that everyone should take an equal share from the resource). Further, a second experiment will examine to what extent feelings of entitlement influence a leader's tendency to take more than others from the resource.

ALLOCATION DECISIONS AND THE EQUAL DIVISION RULE

In order to study how people deal with the potential conflict between personal and collective interests in resource sharing tasks, research has made extensive use of resource dilemmas. In such dilemmas group members share a collective resource from which the individual members can harvest, knowing that (a) individual members earn more if they do not restrict their harvests, but also that (b) the collective interest is furthered if all group members restrict their harvests. For example, in such studies individual group members learn that they earn more the more they harvest, but also that if the total harvests of the group exceed the available resource, all members end up with nothing (e.g. Messick et al., 1983).

How do people generally behave in such situations? Research indicates that if people are the first in their group to take from the resource they are likely to anchor their decisions on the equal division rule (Allison & Messick, 1990; Rutte, Wilke, & Messick, 1987). This equal division rule predicts that all decision-makers should take an equal amount from a common resource, as it is easy to follow and satisfies a general norm of fairness (i.e. equality; Deutsch, 1975; Harris & Joyce, 1980).

It should be acknowledged, however, that in the studies cited above, group members typically had no basis whatsoever on which to differentiate between each other. That is, in the resource allocation studies cited above, members essentially occupied similar positions. But what happens if there is a possibility for differentiation? What if you know that not all members are equal in position, and that, for example, you are labelled as the leader and others as followers?

VIOLATION OF THE EQUAL DIVISION RULE: THE EFFECT OF ROLE ASSIGNMENT

As interdependence situations are often characterized by a conflict of interest, it is encouraging that decision-makers seem to anchor their decisions on rules of fairness. However, recently, it has been argued that situational factors exist that may motivate decision-makers to deviate from such an equal division rule. More specifically, Samuelson and Allison (1994) and De Cremer (2003a) have demonstrated that people who are assigned an authority role (i.e. supervisor in the case of Samuelson and Allison or leader in the case of De Cremer), tend to violate the equal division rule. However, those who are assigned a lower hierarchical role (i.e. follower or subordinate) do not violate this rule. These studies were unclear about why the effects were obtained. Therefore, the aim of the present research is to examine a specific explanation of when and why leaders (in contrast to followers) violate the use of the equal division rule. In social psychology, both the literatures on equity theory and cognitive role schemas identify a similar process of why the above mentioned role effect emerges.

According to equity theory (Adams, 1965; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1973), people prefer outcomes to be distributed in proportion of their inputs. In the case of equal inputs, people are expected to prefer an equal distribution of outcomes (e.g. an equal share of resources). As we already noted, however, role assignments may induce inequality rather than equality. That is, in situations where people occupy different roles it can be expected that those people do not perceive (and anticipate) inputs to be equal and consequently they will prefer an unequal distribution of outcomes. Thus, the role label assigned to group members may influence how the input-output criterion is evaluated in a way that leaders anticipate that they will have a special function within the group associated with additional responsibilities. As a consequence, leaders will anticipate that they will have to put more into the group and consequently will reason that they are entitled to more than an equal share. Another interesting effect of this entitlement explanation is that followers may not be influenced by it. Indeed, previous insights into egocentric biases in fairness judgments suggest that fairness judgments are often coloured by self-interest (Messick & Sentis, 1983). In particular, it has been argued that whereas people in advantageous positions may advocate that it is fair if they earn more than others, people in disadvantageous positions advocate that the equality rule should be applied (see e.g. Komorita & Chertkoff, 1973; Messick & Sentis, 1983).

Interestingly, the same process of entitlement is also advocated in the literature on cognitive role schemas. Indeed, Samuelson and Allison (1994), when explaining their findings with respect to roles and resource allocations, suggested that cognitive role schemas may provide an important explanation of why leaders take more from resources. These authors argued that occupying a certain role within a group activates cognitive schemas (referred to as role schemas; Fiske, 1993), which include an organized set of expectations and privileges attached to that role. These role schemas are believed to exert significant influence on processing social information and decision-making (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Samuelson and Allison further argued that leaders' role schemas constitute expectations that leaders deserve more privileges than generally is given, whereas this is not the case for followers or subordinates (Fiske, 1996; Messé, Kerr, & Sattler, 1992). This implies that leaders may feel that they deserve to get more resources than followers and consequently they may violate the equal division rule.

Thus, both literatures on equity and role schemas allow us to make the following predictions. First, leaders will allocate more to themselves than the equality rule predicts, and they will take more than followers (*Hypothesis 1a*). Second, leaders are expected to deviate more strongly from the equality rule than do followers (*Hypothesis 1b*). Third, compared to followers, leaders more strongly believe that they deserve more than an equal share (*Hypothesis 2*). However, to date, this feeling of entitlement has not been examined directly in allocation situations; something the present research aims to remedy.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants and Design

Eighty-one undergraduate students participated voluntarily in the present study. The independent variable was role assignment (Leader vs. follower).

Procedure

Upon arrival in the laboratory, participants were welcomed by a research assistant and led to an experimental cubicle containing a computer, a table and a chair.

After participating in another unrelated experiment, participants were informed via the computer that they and the four other participants shared a common resource, which was worth 900 Dutch Guilders (409 euros). They were told that their task was to allocate the resource among each other (consisting of five individuals). In this situation, each group member would be allowed to take as much from the resource as they liked. It was pointed out that if people took too much then the resource would be depleted, consequently leaving everyone with nothing. Participants were thus aware that exhausting the resource would be detrimental to all. This situation created high interdependence among the group members as their own decisions influenced both their own and other's outcomes. Further, it was explained that not all group members could choose simultaneously and, therefore, one member at a time would consume the resource. The experimenter would determine who would go first. In reality, all participants were informed that they were the first to take from the common resource (see also Allison & Messick, 1990; Samuelson & Allison, 1994).

After this, the manipulation of role assignment was introduced. Following the methodology of earlier research on leadership in social dilemmas (e.g. De Cremer & Van Vugt, 2002), participants were told that one feature of real-life groups is that differences in hierarchy exist. Therefore, to create groups with real-life features it was determined that some group members would occupy the role of a leader and others would occupy the role of a follower. Following the same role assignment procedure as Samuelson and Allison (1994), half of the participants were told that based on a *chance* procedure they would be a leader, whereas the other half were informed that they would be a follower.

After this role manipulation, participants were asked to what extent they felt (a) entitled to take more than an equal share, and (b) it was legitimate for them to take more than an equal share (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). These two items were combined to form one entitlement score ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$). Participants were then asked how much they wished to take from the common resource. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

In line with Hypothesis 1a, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the allocations revealed a significant effect for role, $F(1, 79) = 16.95$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that leaders took more from the common resource than followers ($M_s = 204.55$ vs. 188.41, $SD_s = 22.42$ and 11.13; respectively).

Further, we predicted that leaders would also deviate more strongly from the equality rule than followers would do. Although the data on the mean harvests suggest that this was indeed the case, one should be aware of the fact that mean harvests do not necessarily yield correct insights into adherence to the equal division rule. In the present experiment, the equal division rule predicts that participants would take around 180 points from the common resource (i.e. $900/5 = 180$). A mean harvest of 180 points could then result if members all apply the equal division rule, but also, for example, if half of the participants harvested 280 chips more, and the other half harvested 80 chips less than an equal share. In order to test for adherence, it is therefore more informative to also analyse the absolute differences between the allocations to self and the allocations that the equal division rule prescribes.

Therefore, in our additional analyses, we calculated first the absolute difference between the amount that participants took from the resource and the amount of 180 as predicted by the equal division rule (e.g. Van Dijk & Wilke, 1995, for a similar procedure). In line with Hypothesis 1b, ANOVA revealed a significant effect, $F(1, 79) = 18.51$, $p < 0.001$, showing that the absolute difference was larger for leaders than for followers ($M_s = 25.30$ vs. 9.14, $SD_s = 21.54$ and 10.52; respectively). Second, a frequency analysis also revealed that of the participants who took more than 180 points, 87.5% were assigned to the leader role and 63% to the follower role, providing further evidence that more leaders than followers allocated more than an equal share to themselves.

In line with Hypothesis 2, a one-way ANOVA on the average entitlement score revealed a significant effect for role, $F(1, 79) = 19.11, p < 0.001$: Leaders felt more entitled to take more than an equal share than did followers ($M_s = 5.01$ vs. $4.02, SD_s = 1.07$ and 0.95 ; respectively). To examine whether or not feelings of entitlement underlie participants' allocation choices, we conducted a series of regression analyses (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). To test for mediation, four steps need to be taken. First, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable has to be significant. Second, the proposed mediating variable should have a significant effect on the dependent variable. Third, the independent variable should have a significant effect on the mediating variable. Fourth, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable has to be reduced when accounting for the mediating variable.

A first regression analysis on allocation decisions revealed a significant effect of Role, $\beta = -0.42, p < 0.001$, paralleling the ANOVA results. A second regression analysis revealed that entitlement significantly influenced allocation decisions, $\beta = 0.55, p < 0.001$. A third regression analysis on the entitlement score revealed a significant effect of Role, $\beta = -0.44$, also mirroring the ANOVA results. Finally, a regression analysis including entitlement as a covariate revealed that the effect of Role disappeared, $\beta = -0.18, p < 0.07$. Calculation of the Sobel-test showed that this reduction in beta-weight was significant, $z = 3.52, p < 0.05$.

As predicted, the results of this study showed that participants assigned to the leader role took more from the common resource than did participants assigned to the follower role. Also, followers more strongly adhered to the equal division rule. Moreover, leaders and followers appeared to engage in egocentric behaviour. Whereas leaders appeared to reason that they were entitled to deviate from the equal division rule and deserved higher outcomes, followers were less likely to deviate from the equal division rule, and certainly did not conclude that they should harvest less than an equal share. Thus, in line with equity and cognitive role theories, being the leader seemed to imply to participants that they were entitled to receive more than an equal share. And, this belief mediated, at least partly, their decision behaviour.

STUDY 2

The results of Study 1 suggest that leaders are more likely than followers to deviate from the equal division rule. The aim of the present research, however, is also to understand *when* leaders violate this rule. We therefore conducted a second study in which we did not merely assess feelings of entitlement in order to see whether this mediated behaviour. That is, our mediation analysis does not preclude the possible reverse causal order that allocations mediated feelings of entitlement. As such, it may well be that self-justification processes partly account for the present findings in the sense that leaders' allocations led them to conclude that they were entitled to a larger share. Therefore, we now manipulated leaders' feelings of entitlement. If leaders feel more entitled to take a larger share from the resource, then manipulating the legitimacy of their leader role should influence their choice behaviour. Indeed, if decision-makers perceive their leader role to be legitimate, they will perceive their belief that they deserve more privileges to be valid (Goodwin, Gubin, Fiske, & Yzerbyt, 2000), motivating them to act according to the input-output proportionality criterion of equity theory. In contrast, if the leader role is not experienced as legitimate, then one's feelings of entitlement will not be perceived as valid, consequently reducing one's tendency to act according to predictions of equity theory. Therefore, it is predicted that legitimate leaders will take more from a common resource than those who are not legitimate (*Hypothesis 1a*). Moreover, legitimate leaders are expected to deviate more from the equality-rule than leaders who are not legitimate (*Hypothesis 1b*).

Method

Participants and Design

Sixty-seven undergraduate students participated in the present experiment. The independent variable was the legitimacy of participant's leader role (Legitimacy vs. no legitimacy).

Procedure

The experiment was part of a classroom exercise and participants were told that the study was an investigation into collective decision-making. Upon arrival, students were asked whether or not they were willing to participate in this study. All students agreed. Participants were explicitly told not to communicate with one another and were put together in such a way that they were part of an actual group. Further, they were seated at desks on which answer booklets were placed, and the anonymity and confidentiality of responses were emphasized.

Then, as in Study 1, the same information about the nature of the resource and the number of people participating was given. Again, it was explained that not all group members could choose simultaneously and, therefore, one member at a time would consume the resource. In reality, all participants were informed that they were the first to take from the common resource.

After this, the legitimacy manipulation was introduced. Participants were required to fill out a managerial skills questionnaire consisting of eight questions (see Ritchie & Moses, 1983 for more details; see also Haslam et al., 1998). When participants finished this questionnaire, their responses were collected and checked by the experimenter. Participants then received a booklet in which it was pointed out that within groups, people differ in hierarchy. That is, some people are leaders whereas others are followers. Therefore, in their group some people would occupy the role of a leader or a follower. It was said that their role would be determined by a random procedure. In reality, however, all participants learned that they were a leader.

In addition to this, we provided information about participants' scores. In half of the conditions, the experimenter had included a message that the participant's score on the managerial questions was rather high, indicating that he or she seemed to possess the necessary skills to be a leader (*Legitimacy*). In the other half of the conditions, the message said that they scored relatively low on the managerial questions, indicating that they did not seem to possess the necessary leader skills (*No legitimacy*).

Then, to test for the effectiveness of the legitimacy manipulation, participants were asked how legitimate they would consider it to be if they took more than an equal share from the resource. In addition, we also asked participants how entitled they felt to take more than an equal share. After answering the questions (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*), participants were asked how much they wished to take from the common resource. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their collaboration.

Results

Legitimacy Evaluation

A one-way ANOVA on the legitimacy score revealed a significant effect for Legitimacy, $F(1, 65) = 4.78$, $p < 0.05$. Leaders in the legitimacy condition felt more legitimate than those in the no legitimacy condition ($M_s = 5.06$ vs. 4.63, $SD_s = 0.84$ and 0.78; respectively).

Entitlement Evaluation

A one-way ANOVA on the entitlement score revealed a significant effect for Legitimacy, $F(1, 65) = 6.55$, $p < 0.05$. Leaders in the legitimacy condition felt more entitled than those in the no legitimacy condition ($M_s = 4.93$ vs. 4.39 , $SD_s = 0.75$ and 0.91 ; respectively).

Allocations

In line with Hypothesis 1a, a one-way ANOVA on the allocations revealed a significant effect for legitimacy, $F(1, 65) = 6.42$, $p < 0.05$. Legitimate leaders took more from the common resource than illegitimate leaders ($M_s = 195.00$ vs. 188.36 , $SD_s = 10.15$ and 10.93 ; respectively).

As in Study 1, the equal division rule predicts that participants would take an average of 180 points from the resource. To test Hypothesis 1b, a similar procedure as in study 1 was used to calculate the *absolute difference* between the amount that participants took from the resource and the amount of 180 as predicted by the equal division rule. ANOVA revealed a significant effect, $F(1, 65) = 5.10$, $p < 0.05$, showing that the absolute difference was larger for legitimate leaders than for illegitimate leaders ($M_s = 15.00$ vs. 9.36 , $SD_s = 10.15$ and 10.06 ; respectively). A frequency analysis also revealed that of the participants who took more than 180 points, 83% were allocated to the leader role and 63% to the follower role.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present research was to examine the effect of role assignments on the use of a decision rule in shared resources, that is, the equal division rule. Two experimental studies showed that occupying the role of a leader significantly influenced allocation decisions. This role-effect was related to how entitled individuals felt to receive a larger share from a common resource.

These findings clearly demonstrated that defining people in terms of being a leader or a follower influenced their decision behaviour. In the first experiment, leaders' allocations were found to deviate more strongly from the equal division rule and were higher than followers' allocations. In common resources, decision-makers are likely to adhere to simple decision rules such as the equal division rule (see Allison & Messick, 1990). This rule seems to satisfy a certain norm of fairness. However, if people occupy different roles, perceptions of fairness may change. That is, people may anchor their choice behaviour on the information they inferred from their specific role position within the group (cf. Blount, 1995). In this process, people may be motivated to make egocentric decisions (cf. Messick & Sents, 1983). The current findings suggest that leader-follower differences are vulnerable to egocentric perceptions too. Whereas leaders may reason that they deserve more than others, followers do not believe they deserve less. For the collective interest, the combination of these perceptions may prove to be disastrous. Findings from the current research imply that collective goals will often be jeopardized: for even if five members use the equality rule, the presence of one member harvesting more than an equal share results into all members going home empty-handed.

The above reasoning regarding the role effect thus suggests that in line with equity theory and cognitive role theories, the idea of feeling more entitled seems prominent in explaining the observed differences between leaders and followers. Indeed, leaders will not anticipate that their inputs will be equal to those of followers, and, therefore they will expect to receive higher outputs (i.e. higher allocations). The present findings supported this preference for outcome distribution.

In addition, those with (anticipated) higher inputs will also feel that they are entitled to more resources. Cognitive role theories indeed note that roles relate to specific behaviours, which are accompanied by beliefs such as entitlement that legitimize one's actions and decisions. Thus, the allocations made by leaders versus followers should be accounted for, at least partly, by feelings of entitlement. As Samuelson and Allison (1994) suggested, 'entitlement would appear to include the prerogative to consume a greater than equal portion of a shared resource' (p. 22). The findings provided evidence for this assumption. In the first study, it was shown that perceptions of entitlement mediated the role-effect on allocations. In Study 2, it was demonstrated that when leaders believe that their leader role is legitimate, they will feel entitled, and they will be motivated to act upon it (i.e. taking more than an equal share). If leaders do not perceive their role to be legitimate, perceptions of entitlement are not activated, consequently reducing their tendency to take more than an equal share. However, we wish to note that in real life one may also observe alternative processes. That is, it may well be that entitlements and allocations do not constitute sequential but parallel processes. As such, it may be worthwhile for future research to include in the design of our Study 2 a no leader control condition to eliminate the possibility of, for example, self-justifying processes (e.g. where allocations mediate feelings of entitlement).

In the current article, our main interest was in unravelling the relation between role assignment, feelings of entitlement, and choice behaviour. For this purpose, we focused on the similarities between interpretations based on equity theory and the literature on social schemas, by noting that both explanations stress the importance of entitlement when it comes down to explaining harvesting behaviour of the more powerful. Thus, it is our opinion that the present experimental setting represents a specific real-life situation in which both research traditions converge in identifying the influence of feelings of entitlements. Indeed, as we noted in the Introduction, people make use of specific social information to determine their input-output relationship and such information can be derived from cognitive role schemas. This does not mean that social schemas and equity theory will always lead to similar predictions. However, such possible distinctions are beyond the scope of the current article.

In the present paper we argued that preferences to adhere to the equality rule might be moderated by role assignment. With this insight, the present study may also be related to recent research demonstrating that the application and evaluation of equality vary with context. In particular, research by Platow, Hoar, Reid, Harley, and Morrison (1997) and Platow, Reid, and Andrew (1998) has shown that the equality rule is applied to members of an ingroup, whereas it is not favoured when applied in the context of comparisons between ingroup and outgroup. This may be particularly true if identification with the ingroup is high (Haslam, 2001). For this reason, it might therefore also be the case that if leaders display strong identification with followers under conditions of heightened social identity salience, then their allocations would be more in line with the equality rule (cf. De Cremer, 2003b; Duck & Fielding, 2003). This is something for future research to determine.

The identification of such a role-effect on the equality rule in allocation situations has important implications for the management of common resources and managers' knowledge. First of all, leaders are generally expected to act in a trustworthy, fair and efficient manner (Yukl, 1994). Knowing that different roles may induce different interpretations of fairness suggests that we should be aware of the fact that providing people different job or status labels is not without problems. Furthermore, the present results convey a less optimistic message—namely that leaders do not always act as good models. Recent research on the importance of charismatic leadership argues that leaders are perceived as more efficient and charismatic when displaying self-sacrificing actions because these behaviours may model fair behaviour for others (De Cremer, 2002; De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002). In a resource allocation context, self-sacrificing behaviour means that leaders take an equal or even less than an equal share from the common resource. Future research should examine in more detail under which conditions leaders may adopt the equality rule (see De Cremer, 2003a, for the moderating effect

of accountability). Related to this point, the present findings also carry the message for managers and leaders that if they receive high salaries or resource benefits, then it is important that they show by means of their actions and decisions that they are entitled to it. From this, a good suggestion for managers and leaders would then be that wearing only the 'head of the leader' is not sufficient to engender followership; leaders also need to show (by means of greater inputs) that they are indeed entitled to a greater share.

Before closing, it should be noted that in the present studies participants were always the first to take from the resource. Future research should therefore examine whether or not the order in which participants take from a common resource (i.e. first, second, third etc.) influences the role-effect on the use of the equal division rule. Furthermore, the present research approached the issue of leadership roles from the perspective of the leader themselves (i.e. leaders perceive uneven outcomes as fair and act accordingly to it). Of course, leadership as a social phenomenon not only encompasses what leaders do and think but also includes followers' perceptions of leaders and their behaviours (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 2002; Haslam, 2001; Hogg, 2001). Indeed, followers may not perceive taking unequal amounts from a common resource to be justified and fair, and hence this may have negative consequences including decreasing cohesion and performance. For this reason, future research should also examine the effect of leadership roles on allocation decisions in greater detail by taking into account both leaders' and followers' perspectives.

Of course, one could also raise the issue of demand characteristics. We did not check for this possibility in detail (although debriefing interviews indicated that participants were not aware of our research questions). However, we based our experimental procedure on existing methodologies (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 2002; Samuelson & Allison, 1994) showing, for example, that allocating participants to different roles by means of a chance procedure is considered to be fair and legitimate. A final suggestion for future research would be to examine whether leader's use of equity principles and associated feelings of entitlement are moderated by a person's cognitive ability to analyse the social information available in a more systematic way or only in a heuristic way (cf. Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagley, 1989). This is in line with statements that fairness can be considered to be a cognitive event (see Lind, 2002), and Roch, Lane, Samuelson, Allison and Dent (2000) argument that 'future research should also take cognitive load into account as a moderator for request size from a common resource pool' (p. 208).

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