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"Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it": the combined effects of leader fear of losing power and competitive climate on leader self-serving behavior

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ABSTRACT

Power is generally valued as it offers access to numerous tangible and intangible benefits. Fear of losing it might therefore initiate behavioral responses aimed at capitalizing on those benefits while it is still possible. Therefore, we propose that leaders' fear of losing power may sway them to engage in self-serving behavior. Moreover, we argue that this effect is particularly strong in environments characterized by competition and rivalry, given that such environments foster opportunistic self-interested behavior. The results of two field studies among organizational leaders and their subordinates (one multi-source dyadic study and one multi-source team study) and a scenario experiment show that fear of power loss is positively related to leader self-serving behavior. As predicted, our results show that this relationship is stronger in more competitive organizational climates. We conclude that the potential effects of (anticipated) power loss deserve more research attention than previously awarded.

"It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it … "

–Aung San Suu Kyi, *acceptance message for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, 1991*

Power entails having the discretion and the means to asymmetrically enforce one's will over others (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Evidently, having power engenders numerous benefits: It implies having control over one's own and others' resources and it frees the individual from the influence of external forces (Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015). Not surprisingly, power is valued by many; hence, people tend to seek it, whether it be in the organizational or larger societal context. Moreover, once they have it, they are generally not willing to let it go (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Fehr, Herz, & Wilkening, 2013). However, although power is inherent in the leader role (Rus, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2012), leaders also run the risk of losing it and, with it, its benefits. Interestingly, whereas research on the psychology of power is extensive (see Anderson & Brion, 2014; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015), the effects of the prospect of losing power have received little attention (see Brion & Anderson, 2013; Sivanathan, Pillutla, & Murnighan, 2008).

We argue that understanding the potential effects of leaders' fear of power loss are important, because their fear of losing current perks and benefits may lead them to engage in behaviors that could negatively impact their subordinates and their organizations. Indeed, we argue that fear of power loss may prompt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior by prioritizing their self-interest at the expense of others' interests. Moreover, we expect this effect to be particularly strong in environments that are perceived to be highly competitive, given that such environments exacerbate self-serving tendencies (Černe, Nerstad, Dysvik, & Škerlavaj, 2014).

With this research, we aim at providing some insight into our rather limited understanding of (fear of) power loss in the organizational context. Such insights are important because potential power loss may be a reality for many in leadership positions (see Greer, van Bunderen, & Yu, 2017) and power may shift from one party to the next in a relatively short period of time (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). As an example, a recent survey indicated that 14% of workers in the US have been demoted at some point in time (Kong, 2018). Moreover, if leader fear of power loss is indeed related to leader self-serving behavior, it is important to know which factors may amplify or attenuate such potentially harmful effects. Not only can such knowledge contribute to the development of theory on power processes, but it may also aid organizations that are interested in curbing leader self-serving behavior.

Power and access to resources

Power implies being able to affect the environment or others at will (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). In any particular social relationship, those with power have more control over valued (material and/or social) resources than those without power (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As such, power denotes the extent to which two or more parties (individuals or groups) are dependent on each other (see Galinsky et al., 2015). Those endowed with power can act relatively autonomously and therefore do not have to rely on others to obtain rewards or avoid punishments (Emerson, 1962). In contrast, those without power are subject to more constraints and have to rely on others to attain valued outcomes or to avoid undesirable outcomes (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003).

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Power is clearly relevant in the organizational context where leaders usually have more formal power than their subordinates (Rus, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010a). Formal power, defined as asymmetric control over resources in organizations, pertains to how hierarchy in organizations is formalized using job titles, reporting structures, and organization charts, whereby a higher rank includes more control over resources (see Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Leaders outrank their subordinates and therefore, by definition, have more formal power than subordinates (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Peiró & Meliá, 2003). Thus, apart from motivating, coordinating, inspiring subordinates etc. – leaders usually also have the formal authority to make decisions that affect their own outcomes, their subordinates' outcomes, and their team's outcomes (Rus et al., 2010a). Of course, leaders differ in the amount of formal power they have available. Whereby some can, for instance, fire subordinates at will, others cannot and need permission from upper management.

Several theoretical perspectives focus on how having power affects the individual. For instance, the Power-Approach Theory (Keltner et al., 2003) argues that having power is associated with increased rewards and freedom and therefore, it activates approach-related tendencies such as attention to rewards, automatic information processing, and disinhibited behavior. In a similar vein, the Situated Focus Theory (Guinote, 2007a) proposes that power provides individuals with greater freedom from constraints and greater agency, because it helps them attune to the situation by means of selective attention and processing flexibility. Based on either of these theoretical perspectives, one could argue that powerful people not only control currently available resources, they also take more deliberate action in order to secure future rewards. Indeed, it has been argued that power intensifies the wanting and seeking of desired end-states (Guinote, 2017; Keltner et al., 2003). In other words, power increases peoples' focus on rewards and, given the general lack of constraints, they are free to devote all of their attention to the pursuit of their goals. As a consequence, powerful individuals tend to prioritize their own goals, act in a more goal-consistent manner, and are more persistent in their goal pursuit (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Guinote, 2007b; Malhotra & Gino, 2011; Overbeck & Park, 2006). In sum, having power means that one has increased access to current and future rewards and resources. Hence, leaders – who have formal power by virtue of their role – usually have greater access than their subordinates to numerous current and future tangible and intangible benefits and resources (see Greer et al., 2017).

Fear of losing power and self-serving behavior

Allegedly Napoleon Bonaparte at one point said "Power is my mistress. I have worked too hard at her conquest to allow anyone to take her away from me". This quote nicely illustrates that people hold their powerful positions dear and want to keep them (Fehr et al., 2013; Saguy & Kteily, 2014). Overall, powerholders seem to succeed in doing so. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that powerholders tend to maintain and reinforce their advantageous positions more often than not (see Anderson & Brion, 2014).

Yet, of course, sometimes people do lose their power. This is particularly glaring in the organizational context, where a potential power loss is a reality for many in leadership positions (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Leaders can be and are fired, demoted or "promoted" into positions where they can no longer have any real impact in the organization (Kong, 2018). Moreover, many leaders have to deal with potential rivals who covet their leadership position as a means of having access to valuable resources (see Greer et al., 2017). These rivals are often a leader's own subordinates who are looking to get ahead on the organizational ladder. Hence, leaders threatened by the prospect of losing power might fear losing access to current and future resources and benefits and react negatively to this prospective loss (see Deng, Zheng, & Guinote, 2018; Saguy & Kteily, 2014). In this respect, previous research has indeed shown that powerful individuals, who held unstable power positions, exhibited increased stress levels (Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011). However, to date, studies on how leaders respond behaviorally to the threat of power loss are largely lacking.

According to the Situated Focus Theory of power (Guinote, 2007a, 2017), powerholders unequivocally pursue their most salient aims and desires and thus act in a situated manner. Given that the possession of power not only provides ready access to current benefits and resources, but also carries the promise of future beneficial outcomes, it is likely that leaders who are afraid of losing this power will focus on self-beneficial goals. This, paired with the increased action-orientation (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003) and persistent goal-pursuit afforded by high power (e.g., Guinote, 2007b, 2017), may encourage self-interested behavior. Leader self-serving behavior implies that leaders disregard group and subordinate interests and, instead, prioritize their self-interest, for instance, by divesting scarce organizational resources away from collective purposes and toward themselves (Rus et al., 2012). Leaders who engage in self-serving behavior might use their position to obtain benefits (e.g., a bonus, a nice office) for themselves at the expense of their subordinates, claim credit for jobs done by their subordinates, or shift the blame for their own mistakes onto their subordinates. Unsurprisingly, whereas such behavior may provide benefits to the leader, it undermines the effectiveness and functioning of organizations and the people working in them and has been shown to contribute negatively to organizational performance and employee functioning (e.g., Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2013; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012; Williams, 2014). We posit that a fear of power loss will encourage leader self-serving behavior. The prospect of losing power comes with the realization that access to current and future resources will be waning. This, in turn, will prompt leaders to prioritize their personal interest, by harvesting resources and fully enjoying the benefits of (still) being in power.

Although there is little direct empirical evidence directly linking fear of power loss to self-serving behavior, a number of

studies provide some support for this line of reasoning. For instance, a recent meta-analysis suggests that people sometimes engage in unethical behavior as a means of dealing with potential losses (see Belle & Cantarelli, 2017). Moreover, studies focusing on the stability or legitimacy of the power position indicate that powerholders whose position is unstable (and arguably face a higher power loss threat) take more risks in an attempt to increase their outcomes (Jordan et al., 2011), and that leaders who have a less legitimate position (and thus also face a higher power loss threat) allocate more shared resources to themselves (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008). Maner and Mead (2010) showed that leaders whose power is tenuous due to instability within the hierarchy, tend to prioritize their own interest over group goals (particularly when they are high in dominance motivation). Moreover, they withhold valuable information from the group, exclude highly skilled group members, and prevent proficient group members from having any influence over the group task. Finally, Georgesen and Harris (2006) found that leaders made more self-serving decisions (awarding more money to the self at the expense of the other) when they had a negative (vs. positive) impression of one of their subordinates and their power was threatened (vs. not threatened). Therefore, based on the previous we posit that:

Hypothesis 1: Leaders' fear of power loss is positively related to their self-serving behavior.

The moderating role of competitive climate

Given that power and leadership processes do not play out in a social vacuum (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007) but are always embedded in a larger social context, it is important to consider organizational context variables that might encourage or discourage leader self-serving reactions when faced with potential power loss. In this respect, we argue that the particular work climate in which leaders are operating may affect the relationship between leaders' fear of power loss and their self-serving behavior. Indeed, perceptions of work climates have been shown to significantly affect employee cognitions, motivation and behavior (for a meta-analysis see Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003). One particularly relevant type of climate is the perceived motivational climate at work which refers to "employees' perceptions of the extant criteria for success and failure emphasized through the policies, practices, and procedures of their work environment" (Nerstad, Roberts, & Richardsen, 2013, p. 2232). According to achievement goal theory (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1989) the perceived motivational climate stipulates what is valued within that specific context and provides individuals with a sense-making framework regarding the types of behaviors that are generally expected, sanctioned and rewarded. In a competitive climate, which is a specific type of motivational climate, only the best and most successful individuals are rewarded (in terms of money, promotion, recognition, or enhanced status). Success is predicated on winning the competition against potential rivals by demonstrating normative superiority, receiving favorable

assessments resulting from intense social comparisons and public recognition of one's relative competence (see Ames & Ames, 1984a; Černe et al., 2014; Nerstad et al., 2013). This strong focus on competition and rivalry has been suggested to lead to the development of negative interdependence, distrust, and opportunistic behavior that prioritizes self-interests over collective interests (Ames & Ames, 1984b; Černe et al., 2014; Roberts, 2012).

There are a number of different lines of reasoning that lead us to believe that leaders' perceptions of a competitive climate will strengthen the relationship between their fear of power loss and self-serving behavior. First, in a competitive climate, employees constantly contend with each other to obtain a share of the limited organizational resources (cf. Wayne & Ferris, 1990). Hence, one's inherent success in the organization is predicated upon gaining and maintaining a competitive edge and losing that edge would result in failure ("winner takes all" mentality). Therefore, in a competitive climate, once one has secured a power position, the stakes of losing are higher than in a less competitive environment. This leads us to argue that leaders' self-serving reactions to a threat of power loss are likely to be amplified in a competitive climate. Second, a competitive climate entails intense and constant comparisons with others. To this end, previous research has shown that social comparison can enhance the negative effects of role or work stressors (Buunk, van der Zee, & van Yperen, 2001). Given that fear of losing power has been shown to be highly stressful and threatening (see Jordan et al., 2011), a perceived competitive climate may amplify the link between fear of power loss and self-serving behavior. Third, a competitive climate has been associated with negative reciprocity (e.g., Černe et al., 2014; Vardi & Weitz, 2004), whereby perceived negative behavior on the part of another person (e.g., threatening one's position), would result in negative behavior directed at that other (e.g., claiming credit for his/her work). For instance, Černe et al. (2014) found that employees who perceived their colleagues to be hiding knowledge from them, reciprocated by hiding knowledge from the initial knowledge hider. Importantly, this effect was strengthened in a competitive climate. Hence, if leaders perceive others as being competitive and as striving to achieve gains at their expense, this will strengthen the tendency to engage in less cooperative and more self-interested behaviors (see Huo et al., 2017; Poortvliet & Giebels, 2012). Fourth, given that a competitive climate tends to promote opportunistic behavior that prioritizes one's self-interest over collective interests (Černe et al., 2014), leaders' already existing inclination to be self-serving, rooted in a fear of power loss, may become justified and amplified by perceptions of a competitive climate. Indeed, Nerstad, Dysvik, Kuvaas, and Buch (2018) recently showed that a competitive climate may strengthen existing self-serving tendencies because it stimulates employees to behave in opportunistic ways by giving primacy to self-interests over collective interests. Some further corroborating evidence for opportunistic self-interested behavior being amplified in competitive climates comes from studies in the sports domain. Specifically, these studies have shown that a competitive climate strengthens the display of aggressive and anti-social behavior in the attempt to obtain victories or

winnings (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009; Kavussanu, 2006). Based on the above, we posit that:

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of a competitive climate will strengthen the positive relationship between leaders' fear of power loss and self-serving behavior.

Overview of the present research

To test our hypothesized relationships, we conducted two field studies and a scenario experiment making use of different samples and operationalizations of our key concepts. Study 1 employed a multi-source cross-sectional design surveying dyads of leaders and employees. In this study, leaders filled in questionnaires that assessed their fear of power loss and their perception of the climate, and subordinates assessed their leader's self-serving behavior. Study 2 aimed to replicate the effects of our first study in a team setting. Similar to Study 1, leaders filled in a questionnaire that assessed their fear of power loss and subordinates assessed their leader's self-serving behavior. This time, however, subordinates also assessed the competitive climate. Finally, Study 3 aimed to find causal evidence for the proposed relationships in a scenario experiment. We manipulated leader fear of power loss and competitive climate and assessed their effects on the projected tendency to engage in self-serving behavior. Approval from the ethics committee of the university was obtained prior to data collection for all three studies and participation was voluntary and confidential. In the following, we will describe the methods and results of each of these studies in more detail and then elaborate on their joint implications in the discussion section.

Study 1

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 159 pairs of Dutch employees and their direct supervisors (51.46% overall response rate). Supervisors (40.9% female) had a mean age of 43.5 years (SD = 11.5) and their subordinates (59.7% female, 1 subordinate did not indicate her/his gender) had a mean age of 34.8 years (SD = 14.2). Of the supervisors, 48.7% had obtained a higher education degree (bachelor's degree or higher) as compared to 31% of the subordinates. The majority of respondents worked in for-profit service organizations (81.8%), whereas the rest worked in manufacturing (8.8%) or the public sector (9.4%). Most of our respondents (61%) worked in small organizations with less than 50 employees. Generally, employees and supervisors worked more than 25 hours a week (53.6% and 89.9%, respectively).

Procedure and measures

Data were collected as part of a study on the role of personality in the workplace. Graduate students recruited respondents by using their work environment and their personal network as well as by visiting local businesses. Potential respondents were approached via e-mail, phone, or face-to-face contact. Envelopes with paper-and-pencil questionnaires were distributed in pairs to employees and their direct supervisors. Each pair was numbered to enable matching of supervisor-subordinate data. Those employees and supervisors interested in participating in the study, were asked to fill in the paper-and-pencil questionnaires without consulting their colleagues, subordinates or supervisor, and to return the questionnaires in the enclosed envelope. This envelope was subsequently either picked up or returned by mail.

Fear of power loss

Fear of power loss was measured by 3 items that were developed for the study based on prior research (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Good, Good, & Golden, 1973). Specifically, leaders indicated how much they agreed (1 = *fully disagree*; 7 = *fully agree;* α = .76) with the following statements: "I sometimes fear that my leadership will be undermined by my subordinates", "I sometimes feel that some of my subordinates are striving for my position", and "I am sometimes apprehensive about my subordinates resisting my directives".

Perceived competitive climate

We used the 8 items of the performance climate dimension of the motivational climate scale (Nerstad et al., 2013) to measure leaders' perceptions of competitive climate. This scale has also been used in previous studies to assess subjective perceptions of climate, given that subjective measures can be more appropriate than objective measures in certain contexts (see Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008; Nerstad et al., 2013). An example item is "In my organization, internal competition is encouraged to attain the best possible results". Leaders indicated their level of agreement with each of the eight items (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*; α = .88).

Perceived leader self-serving behavior

The degree to which leaders demonstrated self-serving behavior was assessed using the 8-item leader self-serving behavior scale (Rus et al., 2010a). We asked subordinates for their opinion about the behavior of their supervisor (e.g., "Instead of giving credit to me or my colleagues for jobs requiring a lot of time and effort, my supervisor took the credit him/herself"). Subordinates rated their leaders' self-serving behavior using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never;* 5 = *very often*; α = .84).

Control variables

We controlled for leader gender (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*) given that previous research has suggested potential gender differences in terms of self-interested behavior in the workplace (Kennedy & Kray, 2013; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010). In addition, we controlled for the contact frequency between leader and subordinate (1 = *seldom or never*; 5 = *very often*), number of subordinates, and the number of years the leader held a supervisory position in the current organization (see Rus et al., 2010a).

Results

We analyzed the data applying a structural equation model using Mplus 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) and used the full information maximum likelihood (FIML) procedure to deal with missing values in all analyses. We relied on Hu and Bentler (1999) recommendations and report the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR) to assess model fit. Generally, a good fit is indicated by values greater than or equal to .90 for CFI, less than or equal to .08 for RMSEA, and .07 for SRMR.

Preliminary analyses

First, we ran three confirmatory factor analyses. We compared a three-factor solution (Model 1: one factor for fear of power loss, one factor for perceived competitive climate, and one factor for self-serving behavior) to a two-factor solution (Model 2: one factor for fear of power loss and perceived competitive climate, one factor for self-serving behavior) and a one-factor solution (Model 3: all items load on one factor). Model fit revealed the three-factor solution to be superior to the two- and one-factor solutions (Model 1: $\chi^2(145) = 276.7$, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .07; Model 2: $\chi^2(147) = 398.7$, CFI = .81, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .11; Model 3: $\chi^2(148) = 631.5$, CFI = .64, RMSEA = .14, SRMR = .16). These results indicate that the factor structure is appropriate and the three concepts are empirically distinct from each other. For means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables see Table 1.

Perceived leader self-serving behavior

Next, we estimated the structural equation model, whereby perceived leader self-serving behavior was predicted by fear of power loss and perceived competitive climate (controlling for gender, leader-employee contact frequency, number of subordinates, and years in a supervisory role) (Model 1). The estimated model fitted the data appropriately ($\chi^2(177) = 324.6$, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .07)[2]. As predicted, fear of power loss was positively related to perceived leader self-serving behavior ($b = .12$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$; 95% CI [.11; .52]). Of the control variables, number of followers ($b = .01$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.11; .41]) and years in

supervisory role ($b = .06$, $SE = .03$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [.02; .32]) were significantly related to leader self-serving behavior. We then estimated the structural model including the latent interaction between fear of power loss and perceived competitive climate as a predictor of perceived leader self-serving behavior (Model 2). The latent moderation was estimated with the XWITH command available in Mplus (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000). The relative fit of the model including the interaction term was assessed using the log-likelihood ratio test (D = 9.8, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .01$). The significant difference indicates that the model including the interaction term fits the data well (Maslowsky, Jager, & Hemken, 2015). In line with Hypothesis 2, the interaction between fear of power loss and perceptions of competitive climate was significant ($b = .08$, $SE = .03$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.06; .42]). To further analyse the interaction, we determined the simple slopes for high and low levels of perceived competitive climate separately (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2013). As predicted, fear of power loss was positively related to perceived leader self-serving behavior under high levels of perceived competitive climate (+1 SD; $b = .26$, $SE = .08$, $p < .01$), but less so under low levels of competitive climate (−1 SD; $b = .10$, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$; see Figure 1).

Study 2

Method

Sample

We approached 80 Dutch organizational teams (i.e., work groups with one supervisor and his/her employees). Fifty-six teams participated in our study (70% response rate; 233 employees and their 56 direct supervisors). Team size per direct supervisor ranged from 2 to 19 employees ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 2.98$). Of the employees, a total of 72.28% ($SD = 19.04\%$) completed our questionnaire and the number of employee ratings per supervisor ranged from 2 to 11 ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 2.26$). All teams had an intra-team response-rate of 50% or higher. Thirty-four percent of the supervisors were female and the mean supervisor age was 38.70 years ($SD = 11.56$). On average, supervisors had held a supervisory position in their current organization for 5.83 years ($SD = 7.00$). Forty-four percent of the employees were female, and their age was

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for study 1 and study 2.

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Study 1									
(1) Fear of power loss (L)	2.44	1.20							
(2) Self-serving behavior (F)	1.30	.51	.28**						
(3) Competitive climate (L)	2.08	.81	.45***	.27***					
(4) Supervisor gender (L)	.41	.49	−.06	−.13	−.15				
(5) Contact frequency (L)	3.79	1.02	−.14	−.04	−.19*	−.06			
(6) Years in supervisory role (L)	4.21	1.19	−.11	.16*	−.05	−.04	.11		
(7) Number of subordinates (L)	12.54	17.57	.14	.32***	.14	.06	−.08	.12	
Study 2									
(1) Fear of power loss (L)	2.24	1.01							
(2) Self-serving behavior (F)	1.54	.42	.41**						
(3) Competitive climate (F)	2.64	.75	.24	.16					
(4) Supervisor gender (L)	.34	.48	.14	.07	−.01				
(5) Years in supervisory role (L)	5.83	7.00	−.30*	−.03	−.33*	.09			
(6) Number of subordinates (L)	6.02	2.98	.17	−.05	.15	.07	.00		
(7) Leader centrality (L)	4.00	.87	−.30*	−.03	−.09	−.22	.23	−.25	
(8) Employee gender (F)	.42	.35	.19	.15	.06	.46**	.05	.18	.01

Note. Study 1: N= 159 dyads. Study 2: N= 56 teams. Gender: 0 = male, 1 = female. L = rated by leaders; F = rated by followers. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.
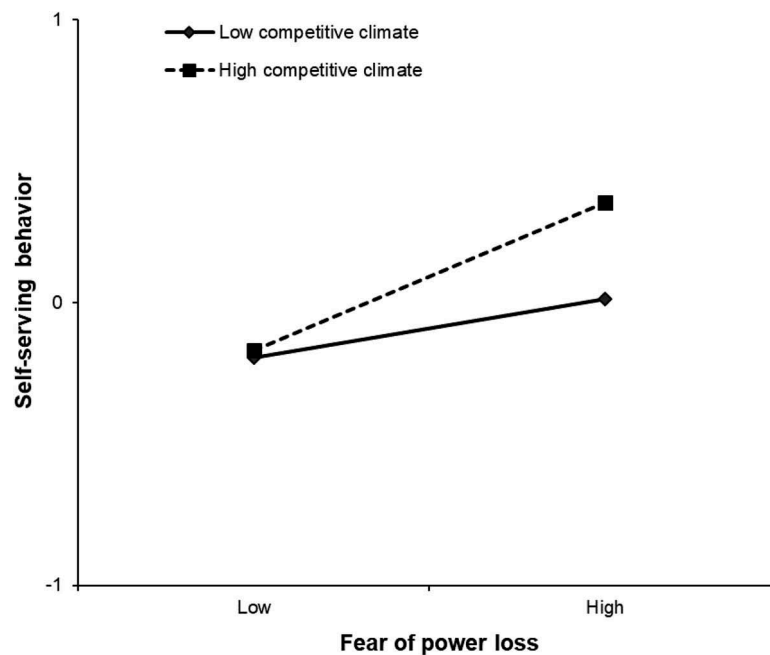
Figure 1. Leader self-serving behavior as a function of fear of power loss and competitive climate in study 1.

32.77 years (SD = 10.01). Most of the teams worked in commercially-oriented service organizations (e.g., shops, banks, cafes, restaurants, schools, health-care organizations, etc.).

Procedure and measures

The data were collected as part of a study on the role of leadership in the 21st century. A convenience-sampling method was used to collect the data. Graduate students recruited the teams by using their work environment, their personal networks, and by visiting local businesses. Both supervisors and employees were approached via e-mail, phone, or face-to-face, and asked to participate in the study. Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were distributed in sets to employees and – separately – to their direct supervisor. Respondents were asked to fill in the paper-and-pencil questionnaires without consulting their colleagues, employees, or direct supervisor. The questionnaires were subsequently picked up by appointment. We relied on a coding system to match the data from the employees with the data from their direct supervisor. Similar to Study 1, we collected the data from different sources in order to avoid common-source effects (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Supervisors rated their fear of power loss and their employees rated perceived leader self-serving behavior and perceived competitive climate. The employee ratings were taken as the basis for the aggregated leader self-serving behavior scores and the competitive climate scores.

Fear of power loss

Supervisor-rated fear of power loss was measured with the same 3 items that were used in Study 1 (1 = *totally disagree*; 5 = *totally agree*; α = .86).

Perceived leader self-serving behavior

The degree to which supervisors demonstrated leader self-serving behavior was assessed using the same 8-items that were used in Study 1 (Rus et al., 2010a). Items were slightly adapted to the team context and were rated by the employees (1 = *never*; 5 = *very often*; α = .88).

Perceived competitive climate

Similar to Study 1, we used the 8 items of the performance climate dimension of the motivational climate scale (Nerstad et al., 2013). This time the items were filled out by the employees (1 = *totally disagree*; 5 = *totally agree*; α = .93).

Control variables

We used control variables similar to the ones employed in Study 1. We controlled for supervisor and employee gender (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*), the number of years the supervisor held a supervisory position in his/her current organization, number of subordinates, and perceived leader centrality (1 = *peripheral* to 5 = *central*; cf. Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; also see Williams, 2014).

Results

Preliminary analyses

To account for nesting in our data (multiple employees share the same direct supervisor), we first ran three multi-level confirmatory factor analyses using Mplus 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). Similar to Study 1, we compared a three-factor solution (Model 1: one factor for fear of power loss, one factor for perceived competitive climate, and one factor for self-serving behavior) to a two-factor solution (Model 2: one factor for fear of power loss and perceived competitive climate, one

factor for self-serving behavior) and a one-factor solution (Model 3: all items load on one factor). Model fit revealed the three-factor solution to be superior to the two- and one-factor solutions (Model 1: $\chi^2(252) = 426.5$, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .05; Model 2: $\chi^2(254) = 468.1$, CFI = .88, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .08; Model 3: $\chi^2(256) = 1011.3$, CFI = .58, RMSEA = .11, SRMR = .18).

To justify the aggregation of employees' ratings of competitive climate and leader self-serving behavior per team empirically, we calculated the $r_{wg}(j)$ scores, and the ICC(1) and ICC(2) for both competitive climate and leader self-serving behavior (Bliese & Halverson, 1998; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1993). For competitive climate, in all (but two) teams $r_{wg}(j)$ scores exceeded the generally accepted .70 cut-off value (.79 ≤ $r_{wg}(j)$ ≤ .99), and was on average .92 (SD = .09). For leader self-serving behavior, in all teams $r_{wg}(j)$ scores exceeded the generally accepted .70 cut-off value (.83 ≤ $r_{wg}(j)$ ≤ 1.00), and was on average .97 (SD = .03). Because the data from the two teams in which employees agreed less with one another did not affect the pattern of results, these teams were kept in the dataset. For both competitive climate and leader self-serving behavior, the ICC(1)'s were respectively .33 and .46, and the ICC(2)'s were respectively .67 and .78, which are all satisfactory. We conclude that aggregation is justified. Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the study variables.

Leader self-serving behavior

We performed regressions to assess the significance (95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals) of the direct effects and conditional indirect effect using 50,000 bootstrap samples. We controlled for supervisor gender, years of employment in a supervisory position in the current organization, number of subordinates, perceived leader centrality, and employee gender[2]. To test our hypotheses, we first regressed leader self-serving behavior on (the standardized scores of) our controls, fear of power loss, and competitive climate (Step 1). We then added the interaction between (the standardized scores of) fear of power loss and competitive climate to the equation (Step 2). The results from Step 1 show that the control variables did not significantly relate to leader self-serving behavior. In line with our first hypothesis, fear of power loss was positively related to leader self-serving behavior, $b = .18$, $SE = .06$, $t(48) = 3.02$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.06; .31], $R^2 = .21$. Moreover, Step 2 indicated that the interaction term was positive and significantly related to self-serving behavior, $b = .12$, $SE = .06$, $t(47) = 2.03$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [.00; .31], $R^2_{change} = .06$. An investigation of the simple slopes of this conditional effect showed that leader fear of power loss was positively related to leader self-serving behavior under high levels of perceived competitive climate (+1 SD), $b = .30$, $t(47) = 3.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.13; .46], but not under low levels of perceived competitive climate (−1 SD), $b = .07$, $t(47) = .83$, $p = $ ns., 95% CI [−.10; .42] (see Figure 2).

Study 3

Method

Participants and design

Our sample consisted of 387 supervisors from a diverse set of industries in the United States (60.5% male; $M_{age} = 36.28$, $SD = 9.69$) who participated in our online business scenario experiment. Supervisors were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website and were paid 1 US Dollar for their participation. Note that previous research has shown that data obtained via MTurk are as reliable as those obtained via traditional methods, specifically when measures to increase data quality are taken (Buhrmester, Talaifar, & Gosling, 2018; Cheung, Burns, Sinclair, & Sliter, 2017)[1].
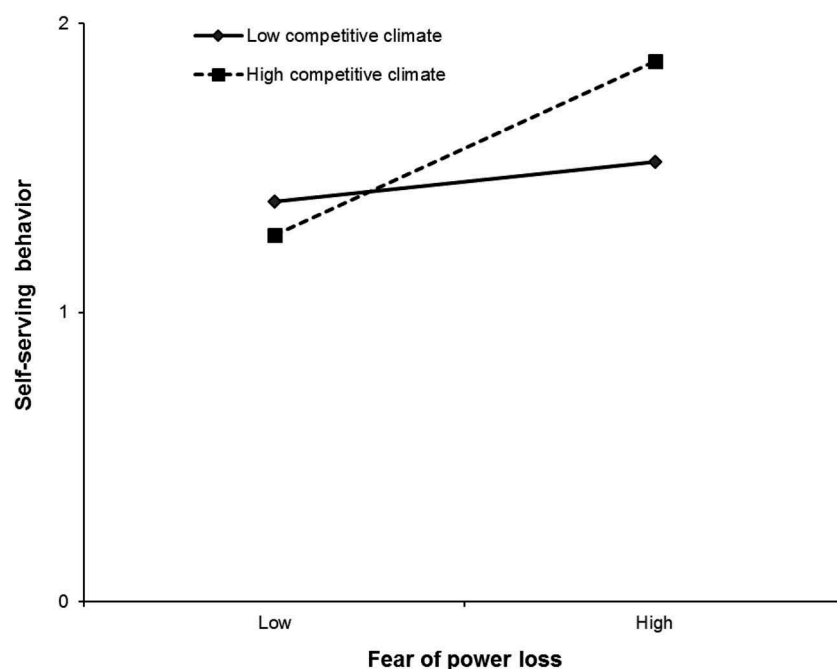

Figure 2. Leader self-serving behavior as a function of fear of power loss and competitive climate in study 2.

Respondents were randomly assigned to a 2 (Fear of power loss: low vs. high) x 2 (Competitive climate: low vs. high) between-subjects design. The distribution of participants across the 4 conditions ranged from 95 to 99 participants per condition. Only employees with supervisory responsibilities holding a paid position for at least 20 hours a week were allowed to participate ($M = 40.90$, $SD = 4.08$). Supervisors had spent on average 5.32 years in their current job role ($SD = 4.08$). Supervisors with a higher education degree (i.e., bachelor's degree or higher) made up 77.0% of the sample and the majority had a white Caucasian background (82.0%).

Procedure and manipulations

After answering some questions pertaining to, for instance, demographics, supervisors were informed that they would read a description of a situation at work. Supervisors were asked to imagine that they were the marketing director for a large multinational company in the consumer goods sector supervising a team of 17 employees. As a supervisor, they were responsible for ensuring that the team reaches or even exceeds its yearly targets and that their employees perform well and deliver results for the business. To manipulate *competitive climate*, respondents in the *low competitive climate* condition read:

> "The climate in your company is not very competitive. Most employees have a chance to get rewarded and promoted. Moreover, individual employees are not singled out as heroic examples of excellent performance. Internal competition among employees is not only discouraged but actively disapproved of and individuals' performance is judged on its own merits, regardless of how others are performing. Everyone in your company (including your subordinates) is aware of this climate. Therefore, there is no competitive rivalry among employees at any levels."

In the *high competitive climate* condition, respondents read:

> "The climate in your company is very competitive. Only the top achievers have the chance to get rewarded and promoted. Moreover, these top achievers are often singled out as heroic examples of excellent performance. Internal competition among employees is not only encouraged but actively promoted and individuals' performance gets ranked in comparison to others. Everyone in your company (including your subordinates) is aware of this climate. Therefore, there is substantial competitive rivalry among employees at all levels."

The scenario proceeded with the *fear of power loss* manipulation. Specifically, in the *low fear of power loss* condition respondents read:

> "You have the feeling that a fair number of your employees are actively supporting you in your leadership position. They seem to fully back you up and are enthusiastically working very hard on projects you assign to them instead of working on projects they deem strategically important for themselves. Moreover, you feel that your employees are rallying behind you because they actively want to help you reinforce your position in the organization. Consequently, you think that you have a good shot at maintaining your position of power in the organization in the foreseeable future."

In the *high fear of power loss threat* condition, respondents read:

> "You have the nagging feeling that a fair number of your employees are actively trying to undermine you in your leadership position. They don't seem to fully back you up, are slacking off on projects you assign to them, and, instead, are working on projects they deem strategically important for themselves. Moreover, you feel that your employees are sabotaging you because they are actively striving for your position in the organization. Consequently, you think that you are at risk of losing your position of power in the organization in the foreseeable future."

At the end of the scenario text, our supervisors were asked to respond to items referring to their perceived tendency to engage in self-serving behavior in this situation, manipulation checks, and were thanked for their participation.

Manipulation checks

To check whether our competitive climate manipulation indeed affected supervisors' climate perceptions, we asked them to indicate their agreement with 2 items (i.e., "In this company, internal competition is encouraged to attain the best possible results", "In this company, an individual's accomplishments are compared with those of other colleagues", $r = .90$; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). As a check of our fear of power loss manipulation, supervisors indicated their agreement with 2 items (i.e., "In this situation, I would fear that my leadership would be undermined by my subordinates.", "In this situation, I would feel that my subordinates are striving for my position", $r = .88$; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

Tendency to display leader self-serving behavior

The degree to which leaders thought they would be likely to demonstrate self-serving behavior was assessed using the same 8-item scale that was used in Study 1 and 2 (Rus et al., 2010a; $\alpha = .89$) which was slightly adapted to fit the scenario context.

Control variables

Similar to Studies 1 and 2 we controlled for leader gender (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*), length of employment in a supervisory position in the current organization (in years), and number of subordinates[3].

Results

Manipulation checks

To assess whether our manipulations were successful, we first conducted 2 × 2 ANOVAs on our manipulation checks. The ANOVA on the competitive climate scale revealed that supervisors in the high competitive climate condition ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 0.97$) scored higher on the scale than those in the low competitive climate condition ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.89$), $F(1, 383) = 526.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_\rho^2 = .57$. The ANOVA on the fear of power loss scale revealed that supervisors in the high fear of power loss condition ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.38$) indeed perceived markedly higher threat than those in the low fear of power loss condition ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.72$), $F(1, 383) = 300.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_\rho^2 = .44$. We also found a small effect of competitive climate, showing that supervisors in the high competitive climate condition ($M_{high} = 4.69$, $SD = 1.93$; $M_{low} = 4.17$, $SD = 2.16$) feared

more power loss, F(1, 383) = 12.07, p < .01, η_ρ^2 = .03. This effect seems unsurprising given the nature of competitive climate. Moreover, given the relatively small effect size we conclude that our manipulations were successful.

Tendency to display leader self-serving behavior

We conducted a 2 × 2 ANCOVA on the self-serving behavior measure and, in line with Study 1 and 2, included gender, the length of employment in a supervisory position, and number of subordinates as control variables[2]. Number of subordinates was significantly and positively related to leader self-serving behavior (t(381) = 2.76, p < .01). Moreover, we found a main effect of fear of power loss, F(1, 381) = 21.15, p < .001, η_ρ^2 = .05, with supervisors in the high fear of power loss condition (M = 2.75, SD = 0.92) reporting to be more likely to engage in self-serving behavior than supervisors in the low fear of power loss condition (M = 2.34, SD = 0.92). We also found the expected fear of power loss x competitive climate interaction, F(1, 381) = 4.94, p < .03, η_ρ^2 = .01 (see Figure 3). A simple effects analysis of the interaction showed that supervisors in the high competitive climate condition reported being more likely to engage in self-serving behavior when they experienced high fear of power loss (M = 2.88, SD = 0.92) than when they experienced low fear of power loss (M = 2.28, SD = 0.87; F(1, 381) = 23.18, p < .001, η_ρ^2 = .05. No effect of fear of power loss was found for supervisors in the low competitive climate condition (M_{low} = 2.40, SD = 0.97 vs. M_{high} = 2.62, SD = 0.92; F(1, 381) = 2.85, ns). Similar to the results of Studies 1 and 2, these findings indicate that a competitive climate strengthens the positive relationship between leaders' fear of power loss and self-serving behavior. Notably, if we regress leader self-serving behavior on our controls, our (standardized) manipulation checks and the interaction between our (standardized) manipulation checks, we find comparable effects (for fear of power loss perceptions, t (381) = 8.92, p < .001, and for fear of power loss perceptions x competitive climate perceptions, t(381) = 3.01, p < .005).

Discussion

The current research takes first steps in addressing the notion that leaders' fear of losing their ability to shape their surroundings at will may have harmful consequences. Indeed, it may be that Aung San Suu Kyi (a Burmese politician, diplomat, author, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and leader of the National League for Democracy) was right when she said that it is the fear of losing power that corrupts those who wield it (ironically, this is exactly what Aung San Suu Kyi's critics are currently accusing her of, namely, that she acts self-servingly because she is afraid of losing power; see Fisher, 2015). We argued that fear of losing power may prompt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior by focusing them on their own interests at the expense of others' interests. We found support for this prediction across our three studies. Both field studies (Study 1 and Study 2) showed that subordinates perceived those leaders who felt more afraid of losing power as engaging in higher levels of self-serving behavior. Moreover, in both studies we found support for our prediction that the relationship between leader fear of power loss and self-serving behavior
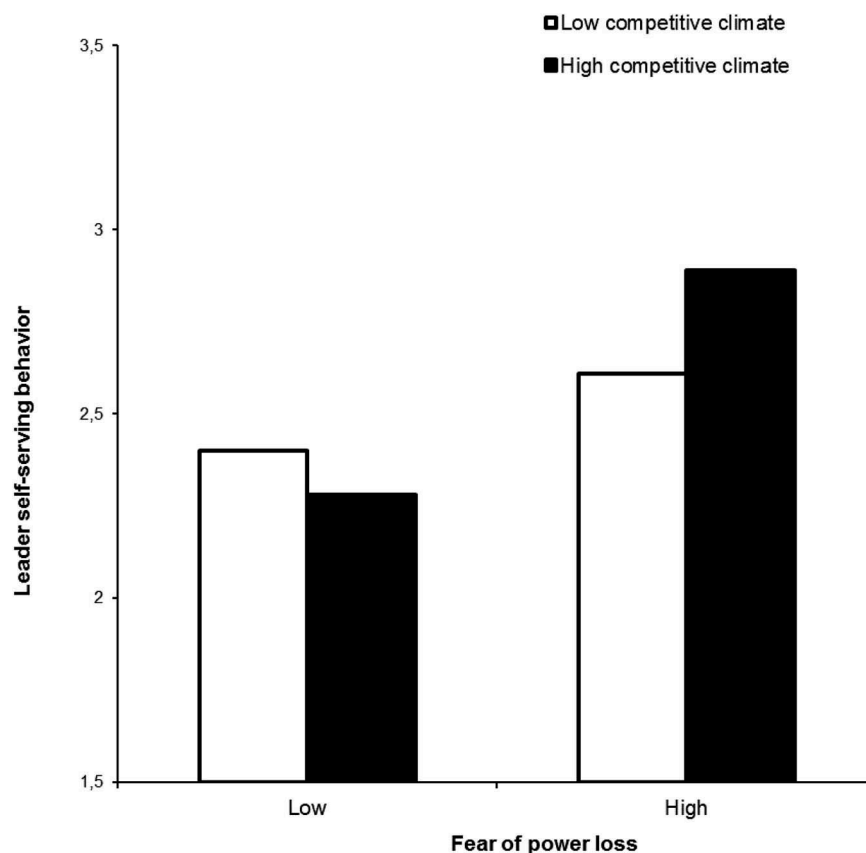

Figure 3. Leaders' tendency to engage in self-serving behavior as a function of fear of power loss and competitive climate in study 3.

is stronger in competitive organizational climates. Specifically, we found a positive relationship between leader fear of power loss and self-serving behavior when leaders (Study 1) and subordinates (Study 2) perceived the climate to be competitive; but not, or less so, when they did not perceive it to be competitive. Study 3, an experimental study, replicates the findings of Studies 1 and 2, and shows that fear of power loss, in conjunction with competitive climate, can cause supervisors to report a higher likelihood of engaging in self-serving behavior. Our studies support and extend previous research in several ways.

First, this research adds to our understanding of the potential effects of leader fear of power loss. This is all the more relevant nowadays, given that power dynamics are shifting regularly in the organizational context and individuals no longer follow relatively predictable career steps (see Savickas et al., 2009). Indeed, the nature of work has rapidly evolved towards more volatility and a loss of power has become a fact of life for many in leadership positions (Kong, 2018). As such, it is important to appreciate the impact that (fear of) power loss can have on how people act in an organizational context.

Second, the current research suggests that leader fear of power loss stimulates self-serving behavior. Given the potential adverse effects of leader self-serving behavior both at the subordinate and at the organizational level (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Peterson et al., 2012) it is crucial to understand its determinants. Surely, our research is not the first to link leader power to leader self-serving behavior. However, previous studies have either focused on the effects of increasing levels of leader power or on the effects of varying levels of leader power on self-serving behavior (Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong, & Antonakis, 2015; Rus et al., 2010a; Rus, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010b; Rus et al., 2012; Wisse & Rus, 2012). This previous research, for instance, has shown that leader power was more likely to be positively related to leader self-serving behavior when leaders were not held accountable (Rus et al., 2012), when they had self-serving effective leadership beliefs (Rus et al., 2010a), when their personal self-concept was salient (Wisse & Rus, 2012), and when power levels were increasing (Bendahan et al., 2015). Hence, it seems that, under certain conditions, having power can foster self-serving behavior. Our study suggests that fear of losing power can do the same. As such, our research offers a valuable addition to what we already know about leader power and leader self-serving behavior by focusing on the potential effects of a threat of power loss, a largely underexplored area in leadership research.

Third, our work suggests that perceived competitive climate affects the extent to which leader self-serving behavior is contingent upon leader fear of power loss. Thus, our studies indicate that the work context (or at least leaders' and employees' perceptions of that context) can impact their tendency to engage in self-serving behavior. This is important for a number of reasons. First, leaders operate in a specific social context and we believe that more attention should be paid to the interplay between individual level-factors and contextual factors when investigating determinants of leader behavior. Second, organizational climates, as well as individuals' perceptions of these climates, can change over time.

Organizations that stimulate the development of a climate that fuels a "winner take all mentality" may, over time, inadvertently create an environment that favors potential unethical behavior. Whereas our data does not speak to the mechanisms underlying the moderating effect of perceived competitive climate in the fear of power loss – self-serving behavior relationship, there are at least a few potential explanations that could be worth exploring in future research. On the one hand, a competitive climate increases the stakes of losing power, given that success is predicated upon winning it all and losers are left empty-handed. Hence, an unwanted side-effect of such a climate could be that it disproportionately focuses individuals on outcomes at the expense of the process of reaching outcomes, potentially leading them to take "shortcuts" in reaching their goals (Davis, Mero, & Goodman, 2007). On the other hand, a competitive climate may also prompt leaders to favor a tit-for-tat strategy, given that others are seen as striving to achieve gains at their expense. Future research could therefore explore which of these potential explanations might best be suited to further explain the moderating effect of competitive climate in the fear of power loss – self-serving behavior relationship.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Naturally, our studies have a number of strengths and limitations. One clear strength is that we opted for a multi-study approach. Study 1 employed a multi-source data set with more than 150 pairs of leaders and followers. Study 2 also employed a multi-source data set but broadened the perspective to a team context and tested the hypotheses with data derived from more than 50 teams. Finally, Study 3 employed an experimental design with more than 380 employees in leadership positions. We found support for our hypotheses in all three studies. Notably, regardless of whether we used the leader's climate perceptions, shared employee perceptions of climate, or a manipulation of climate, we always found competitive climate to strengthen the relationship between leader fear of power loss and leader self-serving behavior. A weakness of both field studies is that they are mute when it comes to determining causality. Our third study, however, is a scenario experiment that shows that leader fear of power loss relates to more self-serving intentions when the organizational context is competitive. This latter study's weakness, however, is that it is hypothetical in nature. Future research may consider laboratory experiments. These may score lower on mundane realism, but would make it easier to assess actual self-serving behavior (see Podsakoff & Podsakoff, in press). Another limitation of our approach is that our studies do not allow for inferences regarding intra-individual changes across time. Therefore, future research might benefit from employing a longitudinal multi-source design to capture how changes in power dynamics affect both perceived as well as actual leader self-serving behavior.

Another potential issue could be that we operationalized leader fear of power loss by assessing the extent to which leaders feared losing power over their subordinates. By doing so, we focused mostly on the extent to which fear of power loss resides in the leaders' formal power base (Magee &

Galinsky, 2008; Peiró & Meliá, 2003). Based on their rank (their position in the organizational hierarchy) leaders have control over resources that affect their subordinates. Subordinates that resist directives, undermine leadership, or strive to remove the leader from his/her position in the hierarchical ladder threaten that formal hierarchy. Given that we focus on fear of power loss in an organizational context, our relative emphasis on formal power seems to make sense. However, future work could benefit from focusing on the effects of threats to informal power. A leader's informal power results from her or his personal characteristics and "influence over personnel based solely upon the manager's superior knowledge, expertise, and proven ability to perform" (Singh, 2009, p. 168). Notably, informal power is not necessarily associated with formal structure, and can flow in all directions (see Peiró & Meliá, 2003). This means that a leader does not necessarily have more informal power than, for instance, a peer has. Yet, it would be interesting to investigate whether leader fear of losing informal power (for instance caused by subordinates questioning the leader's skills or expertise or by dwindling charisma) would also lead to more leader self-serving behavior and whether these effects would be as strong as the effects of leader fear of losing formal power.

In addition, whereas one's subordinates could indeed be a potential threat to one's power, there are, of course, other grounds for losing power. For instance, leaders may anticipate losing power due to (early) retirement from the work force. Early retirements – particularly those occurring prior to traditional and legal retirement age – are relatively common and they seem to have adverse effects on health (Calvo, Sarkisian, & Tamborini, 2012). Likewise, involuntary retirements negatively affect well-being, arguably (partly) because of premature power loss. Future research could therefore investigate whether the prospect of early retirement might also affect leader self-serving behavior, particularly under circumstances where the early retirement is not perceived to be voluntary (see Tsai & Xie, 2017 who recently presented some data implying that this may indeed be the case). Moreover, leaders may also anticipate power loss because of demotion or firing. One possible response to such a threat would be to resign. Arguably, demotion and, sometimes also firing, can be felt to signal underperformance, and rather than face this possible decline in reputation, the leader may opt to leave the firm (MacLeod & Malcomson, 1988; van Dalen & Henkens, 2018) before actually being demoted or fired. Although this response still denotes a loss of power, it may enhance the leader's perception that a restoration of the power position is still possible in the future. Moreover, research has shown that employees who are actually demoted end up being less satisfied with their jobs (Josten & Schalk, 2010), that involuntary job loss is stressful and related to poorer health (Bartley, Ferrie, & Montgomery, 2006; Schröder, 2013), and that employees who lose their jobs may sue their former companies to gain a few months extra severance pay as well as to express their anger and bitterness for being laid off (Miller & Robinson, 2004). Given that there has been little research attention devoted to understanding whether leaders might engage in self-serving behaviors when faced with the prospect of being demoted or fired, future research might benefit from extending the current research by investigating whether the prospect of being demoted or laid off might also prompt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior.

To explore the moderating effect of competitive climate, we used the performance climate dimension of the motivational climate at work scale (Nerstad et al., 2013). The authors also developed a scale to measure another climate dimension, namely a mastery climate. Mastery climates are work environments where the employees perceive that effort, sharing, and cooperation are valued and where the emphasis is on learning and the mastery of skills (see Ames, 1992). In these types of climates, social comparison processes and normative criteria are weak, and success is predicated upon the current level of performance exceeding one's own prior levels of performance (Ames & Ames, 1984a). Future research could investigate whether mastery climate perceptions might weaken the relationship between fear of power loss and self-serving behavior, given that such climates stimulate cooperation and interpersonal trust (Černe et al., 2014). In addition, it may be interesting to investigate whether certain leader traits and styles could weaken the relationship between fear of power loss and self-serving behavior. For instance, future research could include leader humility and/or servant leadership. Both humble and servant leaders are considered to be less self-interested and less obsessed with power and authority (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Owens & Hekman, 2016; van Dierendonck, 2011) and, as such, they may be less likely to respond self-servingly when their position is questioned.

Another potential interesting avenue for future research could be to investigate the role of cultural differences in the link between leader fear of power loss and self-serving behavior. It has previously been argued that the tendency to engage in self-serving behavior is stronger among leaders from individualistic as compared to collectivistic cultures (see Wisse & van Knippenberg, 2009). Moreover, there is some evidence suggesting that parting with valued possessions is more painful for those coming from countries with individualistic cultures than for those coming from countries with more collectivistic cultures, because self-enhancement is more important for those with independent self-construals and these tend to be stronger in individualistic cultures (Maddux et al., 2010). This suggests that the prospect of losing power may be particularly impactful for leaders coming from more individualistic cultures, and, as such, their reactions might also be stronger. Notably, the samples in our studies came from countries that can be considered to be highly individualistic (The Netherlands and the US; see Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, these leaders may have responded more strongly than leaders from other cultures would. We hope that future research explores the generalizability of our findings across different cultures.

Finally, future research may investigate whether the combined effects of leader fear of power loss and competitive climate on self-serving behavior are contingent on the leader's level of power. That it, it could be that the prospect of losing power may be particularly hard for those that have a lot of power to begin with (as suggested by the saying: "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."). If that is the case, it could be

that those who are particularly powerful might act more self-servingly in the face of potential power loss. This would certainly explain the behaviors of some state leaders that have shifted money to offshore accounts at the expense of the impoverished public (think about leaders such as Sani Abacha of Nigeria, Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo, or Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines).

Practical implications

Leader self-serving behavior can lead to an array of negative consequences for subordinates as well as for the organization at large. Hence, gaining some insight into the conditions that prompt leaders to engage in self-serving behavior could have practical relevance in terms of potentially curbing such behavior. Although implications for practice should be seen as tentative, our research suggests that interventions geared at fostering leaders' sense of safety regarding their positions, ideally, combined with interventions geared at creating a sense of shared fate might be particularly fruitful. In this respect, organizations might consider creating higher task and reward interdependence within teams and departments. Such set-ups tend to create perceptions of shared fate, increase trust and promote supportive behavior, whereby group members look out not only for their own but for also for others' interests (see Goal Interdependence Theory; Deutsch, 1949). In addition, organizations that promote transparency in decision-making and procedural fairness might also be able to keep leader self-serving behavior at bay. If leaders trust that the organization values procedural fairness in decisions regarding demotions, reorganizations or lay-offs, they may feel less fearful and be more likely to keep the group interest in mind (see Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006).

Whereas it may be tempting to argue that organizations should work on curbing a competitive climate, this may be neither desirable nor feasible. In a work context, employees need to focus not only on cooperating, sharing and mastering a task, but also on demonstrating that they can achieve results (see also DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Therefore, both a mastery and a competitive climate seem to be needed in organizations, and previous research has shown that they can and do co-exist (Caniëls, Chiocchio, & van Loon, 2019; Nerstad et al., 2018). However, the key would be to create a balance between the two, whereby employees simultaneously perceive a sense of shared fate, emphasize learning and cooperation while also being focused on achieving high performance.

Conclusion

Leader fear of power loss might lead to undesirable consequences for individual employees and the organization. The present research suggests that leader fear of power loss may stimulate leader self-serving behavior, particularly if leaders operate in an environment that they perceive to be competitive. Given that organizations are dynamic systems and that a threat of power loss is a reality for many leaders, insights into its potential downstream effects are crucial. As such, the present research hopes to have opened an avenue for exploring the potential effects of anticipated power loss on leader behavior.

Notes

1. We first removed all those participants from the dataset who indicated that we should not use their data ($N = 32$), next we removed one participant who was past regular employment age (i.e., over 70 years), and finally, we removed all participants who did not seem to have taken the study seriously (i.e., extremely long or short periods of time to complete the study [upper and lower 5%]; incorrect answers to the majority of attention checks; $N = 48$; DeSimone & Harms, 2018).
2. Even if we would have been more parsimonious with adding control variables (see Becker, 2005) the pattern of results for all studies would remain the same and model fit for Study 1 would in fact improve.
3. To show that fear of power loss has effects over and above other stressors at work, we measured supervisors' experienced job demands prior to presenting them with the scenario. We used subscales of the Dutch Questionnaire on the Experience and Assessment of Work: ("QEEW2.0"; van Veldhoven, Prins, van der Laken, & Dijkstra, 2015). Specifically, we measured problems with work (6 items, $\alpha = .84$), ambiguities about work (5 items, $\alpha = .84$), changes in tasks (5 items, $\alpha = .71$), remuneration (5 items, $\alpha = .86$), and career possibilities (4 items, $\alpha = .85$), on a scale from 1 (*definitely not*) to 5 (*definitely*). We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis predicting leader self-serving behavior by entering the various job demands in Step 1, fear of power loss and competitive climate (dummy coded $0 = low$; $1 = high$) in Step 2, and their interaction in Step 3. Step 2 did explain a significant proportion of variance in the reported probability to display self-serving behaviors, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $\Delta F(2,379) = 10.29$, $p < .001$, revealing that the main effect of fear of power loss was still significant when job demands were entered in Step 1, $B = 0.39$, $SEb = 0.09$, $t(379) = 4.46$, $p < .001$. Step 3 also did explain a significant proportion of variance, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F(1,378) = 7.80$, $p < .005$, and revealed a significant interaction, $B = 0.49$, $SEb = 0.17$, $t(379) = 2.79$, $p < .001$. Thus, fear of power loss has effects over and above other stressors at work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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