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# Distributive justice moderating the effects of self-sacrificial leadership

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**Abstract** This study examined the interactive effect of distributive justice and leader self-sacrifice on employees' organizational commitment and autocratic leadership perceptions (ALP). We propose that positive leadership styles like self-sacrifice will have a stronger impact on employees' attitudes and judgments when organizational outcomes are perceived and experienced as unfavorable or more negative. One such outcome that may turn out unfavorable is distributive justice. Findings indeed showed that leader self-sacrifice positively influenced organizational commitment and negatively ALP, but only when distributive justice was low (i.e. perceptions of unfair outcomes).

## Introduction

Recently, leadership research has focused much of its attention on transformational relative to transactional models of leadership (Bass, 1985, 1990; Burns, 1978). In the transformational leadership models, leadership is seen as a form of influence that takes followers beyond their self-interest and motivates them to internalize values and goals of the larger collective (Bass, 1995; Burns, 1978). This tradition of leadership research figures prominently in the literature on charisma (Conger and Kanungo, 1998) and has increased our understanding of why certain individuals and leader figures build so easily trust, loyalty and dedication among its followers (Conger, 1989; Conger and Kanungo, 1998). This research directly focused attention on an important leadership aspect referred to as "self-sacrificial leadership". Anecdotal analyses of (charismatic) leadership suggest that self-sacrificial behavior contributes substantially to leadership effectiveness (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1998), and indeed self-sacrifice has been proposed to be an important component of charismatic leadership (Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Yorges *et al.*, 1999). A classic example is Lee Iacocca's decision as CEO of Chrysler to set his annual salary to US\$1 in a time of crisis to prove his commitment to Chrysler's plight, and to elicit similar commitment from Chrysler's employees. Although our understanding of the effectiveness of this type of leadership has significantly increased during the last decade, leadership research also needs to be concerned with determining when effective leadership types exert more versus less influence. The present paper attempts to do this by examining the moderating influence of distributive justice on the effects of self-sacrificial leadership.



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### Leadership and self-sacrifice

In the literature it is commonly accepted that self-sacrifice indicates a person's willingness "to suffer the loss of types of things to maintain personal beliefs and values" (Yorges *et al.*, 1999, p. 428), and it has been noted to be a common behavior of great leaders (Burns, 1978). Also, the concept of self-sacrifice shows similarities to recent approaches perceiving leaders as those who lead by serving others (e.g. Greenleaf and Spears, 2002), although it remains unclear whether self-interest on part of the leader is absent or not (Avolio and Locke, 2002). Further, self-sacrifice is proposed to be related to criteria of leadership effectiveness such as follower organizational citizenship behavior and prosocial behavior (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1998). The concept of self-sacrifice indicates that the leader is willing to engage in personally risky behavior to serve the goals and mission of the group or organization (Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Shamir *et al.*, 1993). If a leader is perceived to be self-sacrificing, perceptions of effectiveness and ratings of cooperation are positively influenced (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1999; Yorges *et al.*, 1999). For example, Yorges *et al.* (1999) demonstrated that participants influenced by a self-sacrificing leader (vs a self-benefiting leader) contributed more money to a charity fund. In a similar vein, Choi and Mai-Dalton (1999) showed that followers were most willing to reciprocate the behavior of a self-sacrificial leader, and De Cremer (2002) showed that a self-sacrificial leader (vs a self-benefiting leader) was most effective in motivating group members to cooperate in an organizational public good dilemma (De Cremer and van Knippenberg, 2002).

One important psychological explanation for the fact that a self-sacrificial leader yields such favorable implications for groups, teams, and organizations is that a self-sacrificing leader links followers' sense of identity to the organization and its mission and goals (Lord *et al.*, 1999; Shamir *et al.*, 1993). By exhibiting self-sacrificial behavior on behalf of the collective, the leader may render the organization and the organizational goals and interests salient to followers, and identify the organization as worthy of individuals' dedicated efforts. Both the salience of the organizational identity and the suggestion that the organization is worthy of one's dedicated effort may promote affiliation with the organization among followers (Shamir *et al.*, 1993). This supposed influence of leaders on the identification of followers is also central to Shamir *et al.*'s (1993) motivational theory of charismatic leadership. They argue that:

... the influence of charismatic and transformational leaders is based on their success in connecting followers' self-concept to the mission and to the group such that followers' behavior for the sake of the group becomes self-expressive (Kark *et al.*, 2003, p. 248).

In addition to this effect on followers' sense of organizational and collective identification it is also important to note that self-sacrificing leadership enhances feelings and perceptions of attraction and dependence on followers. That is, leaders high in self-sacrifice are evaluated as charismatic and attractive and act as the perfect model (Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Kark *et al.*, 2003; Shamir *et al.*, 1993). In this way, followers easily identify with this type of leader and consequently evaluate such leaders in favorable terms (Conger and Kanungo, 1998). As a result, self-sacrificing leaders, despite possible pushy efforts to reinforce their vision and goals, are not perceived as directive and autocratic leaders.

Thus, literature and empirical research clearly suggests that self-sacrificial leadership is positively related to criteria of leadership effectiveness. As a result, it

seems important to organizations that managers include some sort of self-sacrifice in their behavioral repertoire because these leaders are able to promote affiliation with the organization and are not perceived as directive and autocratic leader types. However, in the present research, we wish to point out that leadership effects do not take place in a social vacuum and that as such organizational features and other types of feedback may moderate the effectiveness of beneficial leadership behavior like self-sacrifice. According to us, one type of feedback (derived from the organization) that may have such moderating influence is distributive justice.

### **The moderating effect of distributive justice**

In general, employees' feelings and evaluations in social interactions flow from their assessments of the fairness of their outcomes when dealing with others such as their leaders (Adams, 1965; Walster *et al.*, 1978). Therefore, employees are less concerned about the qualities and motives of their leaders when receiving fair or favorable outcomes. That is, if organizational outcomes are positive it is inferred that everything is going well, including the management and supervision (Greenberg, 2004). However, concerns about leadership qualities become more salient when organizational outcomes are perceived and experienced as unfavorable or more negative. Indeed, organizations can shape how favorable personal outcomes are and one such outcome important to employees is how fair or unfair the outcomes (e.g. salary, promotion etc.) are that they receive, referred to as distributive justice (Deutsch, 1985). Thus, employees' sense of distributive justice is largely a product of the organization and as such organizations have a strong influence on how fair interactions within the organization are in terms of distribution (Greenberg, 1993; Sheppard *et al.*, 1993).

Under such circumstances in which outcomes are perceived as unfair, employees will be motivated to attend more closely to how their direct supervisor or leader acts toward them. In this process, employees will be focused on evaluating whether their leader is motivated to promote their well-being and interest, their sense of attachment to the organization, and to treat them in a respectful and just way (Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996; Tyler, 1999). Thus, if outcomes are perceived as undesirable and unfavorable, employees need confirmation that management does still care about them. In this respect, it will be extremely important under such circumstances that the leader displays favorable and positive leader behavior, like being self-sacrificial. All of the above thus implies that we expect an interaction in which distributive justice acts as a moderator of self-sacrificial leadership, and as such identifies another organizational situation that renders certain leadership qualities (self-sacrifice in the present research) to be of lesser influence (Kerr and Jerimier, 1978).

### **The present research**

To summarize, we predict that leader self-sacrifice and distributive justice interact in determining leadership effectiveness such that the effects of self-sacrifice will be stronger when outcomes are perceived as unfavorable (or unfair) relative to favorable (or fair) (*H3*). Although the main focus of the present study was on this interaction effect, we also included hypotheses about the main effects of self-sacrifice (*H1*) and distributive justice (*H2*), in such a way that both high leader self-sacrifice and high distributive justice will reveal positive consequences.

As mentioned earlier, it is suggested that leader self-sacrifice influence significantly followers' level of affiliation and commitment to the organization and perceptions that the leader is not directive and autocratic. Therefore, in the present research we will test whether the predicted interaction (and in addition the main effects) can be obtained using both these variables as dependent measures. Both variables are also considered to be important to the functioning of organizations. That is, organizational commitment (OC) is a form of caring for and appreciating the organization one works in and includes "internalization, behavioral intentions, and affect" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p. 23). As such, OC has been shown to be an important variable that has considerable influence on organizational outcomes relevant to the organizational welfare like organizational citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction and intentions to stay within the organization (Allen and Meyer, 2000). Also, it is important that employees do not perceive their leaders to be autocratic as it has been shown that perceived autocratic leadership negatively influences group stability, group climate and feelings of being content and happy, because it limits a sense of control that group members experience over decision-making processes within their teams, groups and organizations (Bass, 1990; Van Vugt *et al.*, 2004).

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

Human resource managers (HRMs) of 12 municipalities in the province of south Holland in The Netherlands were asked to assist in a study on leadership. Nine of them agreed to distribute questionnaires at random among employees within their organization. Questionnaires were sent with a cover letter to the intended respondents. The letter explained the alleged purpose of the study and emphasized that participation would be anonymous. Ten days later, a reminder was sent to increase the response rate.

HRMs asked 575 civil servants to participate. A total of 257 questionnaires were sent back, yielding a response rate of 45 percent. Of the 257 respondents, 58 percent were male and 42 percent were female. The mean age was 41.2 years ( $SD = 9.4$ ). It was shown that 15 percent had a low, 44 percent a medium, and 41 percent a high level of education. Also, 45 percent had a net month salary below €1,500, 45 percent earned between €1,500 and €2,500 a month, and 10 percent earned more than €2,500 a month.

### *Measures*

The present study was part of a large field study on leadership. Measures relevant to the present study are described.

*Distributive justice.* To assess perceptions of distributive justice, we based our questions on the recently developed distributive justice scale of Colquitt (2001). This scale contains the following four items: "Does your salary reflect the effort you have put in your work?", "Is your salary appropriate for the work you have completed?", "Does your salary reflect what you have contributed to the organization?", and "Is your salary justified given your performance?" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ). Responses were given on a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

*Self-sacrifice.* Self-sacrifice was assessed with two items (Conger and Kanungo, 1998): "My supervisor takes high personal risks for the sake of the organization" and "My supervisor, in pursuing organizational objectives, engages in activities involving

considerable self-sacrifice". Items were combined to form one average self-sacrifice score ( $r = 0.59, p < 0.001$ ) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

To assess perceptions of OC we used the following items to measure collective identification (Ellemers *et al.*, 1998): "I feel emotionally attached to my municipality", "I feel like I am part of the family in my municipality", and "I experience the problems of municipality as my own problems". Items were combined to form one average organizational identification score (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.79$ ) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

*Autocratic leadership perceptions.* To assess how autocratic employees considered their supervisor to be, two questions were asked: "My supervisor takes decisions in an autocratic manner", and "My supervisor always pushes his/her opinion". These two items were combined to form one average score ( $r = 0.71, p < 0.001$ ) (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

**Results**

*OC*

Means, SDs, and intercorrelations for the study variables are displayed in Table I. To test our hypotheses, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted in which OC was predicted by main effect terms (distributive justice and self-sacrifice) at step 1 and the interaction term at step 2 (Table II). Following Aiken and West (1991), distributive justice and self-sacrifice were centered (i.e. by subtracting the mean from each score) and the interaction term was based on these centered scores. Table II shows the regression results: OC was significantly related to self-sacrifice,  $\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001$  (*H1*), but not to distributive justice,  $\beta = 0.09, p < 0.17$  (*H2*). Furthermore, the interaction between distributive justice and self-sacrifice (*H3*) was significant,  $\beta = -0.14, p < 0.05$ . Simple slopes analysis was conducted to further analyze this interaction (Aiken and West, 1991). When outcome justice was low (= unfair

**Table I.**  
Means, SD, and intercorrelations of distributive justice, self-sacrifice, OC, and ALP

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
Distributive justice	2.75	0.89				
Self-sacrifice	3.08	0.90	0.06			
OC	3.23	1.00	0.10	0.24**		
ALP	3.37	1.04	-0.17**	0.02	0.14*	

**Notes:**  $n = 255$ . Higher scores indicate lower self-sacrifice, lower OC, lower ALP, and higher scores of self-sacrifice; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table II.**  
Results of hierarchical regression analysis of OC on distributive justice and self-sacrifice

	$\beta$	$R^2$	$R^2_{adj}$	$R^2_{change}$	df
Dependent variable	OC				
Step 1		0.07	0.06	0.01	2, 249
Distributive justice	0.09				
Self-sacrifice	0.24**				
Step 2		0.08	0.07	0.01	3, 248
Distributive justice $\times$ self-sacrifice	-0.14*				

**Notes:** Total  $F(3, 248) = 7.58; p < 0.001$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$

outcomes), self-sacrifice was significantly and positively related to OC,  $\beta = 0.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that high perceptions of self-sacrifice were associated with a high sense of OC. However, when outcome justice was high (= fair outcomes) self-sacrifice was not significantly related to OC;  $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.17$ .

*ALP*

Means, SDs, and intercorrelations for the study variables are displayed in Table I. Again, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted in which ALP were predicted by main effect terms (distributive justice and self-sacrifice) at step 1 and the interaction term at step 2 (Table II). Also, distributive justice and self-sacrifice were centered (i.e. by subtracting the mean from each score) and the interaction term was based on these centered scores. Table III shows the regression results: ALP were significantly related to distributive justice,  $\beta = -0.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , but not to self-sacrifice,  $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.59$ . Furthermore, the interaction between distributive justice and self-sacrifice (*H3*) was significant,  $\beta = -0.17$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Simple slopes analysis was conducted to further analyze this interaction (Aiken and West, 1991). When outcome justice was low, self-sacrifice was significantly and positively related to ALP,  $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that high perceptions of self-sacrifice were associated with lower perceptions of autocratic leadership. However, when outcome justice was high self-sacrifice was not significantly related to ALP;  $\beta = -0.11$ ,  $p < 0.18$ .

**Discussion**

The present study examined the effect of an important leadership style, i.e. self-sacrifice on OC and perceptions of autocratic leadership. In addition, it was examined whether the effect of self-sacrifice is a function of how fairly employees perceived their outcomes to be. The results showed that both independent variables indeed interacted and that the effect of self-sacrifice, which reveals beneficial consequences for the organization (e.g. higher commitment on behalf of the employees), was only significant when employees evaluated their received outcomes as unfair.

As predicted, employees exhibited stronger OC and evaluated their leader as less autocratic when their supervisor was perceived to be high in self-sacrifice. However, this pattern was only found when employees' outcomes were perceived as unfair. These results clearly suggest that employees attend to and care most about the leadership style of their supervisor when they receive unfavorable outcomes (Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996; Greenberg, 2004). This type of outcome is usually perceived as negative, and, consequently, triggers a process motivating employees to focus more

	$\beta$	$R^2$	$R^2_{adj}$	$R^2_{change}$	df
Dependent variable	ALP				
Step 1		0.03	0.02	0.01	2, 249
Distributive justice	-0.17*				
Self-sacrifice	0.04				
Step 2		0.06	0.05	0.02	3, 248
Distributive justice $\times$ self-sacrifice	-0.17**				

**Notes:** Total  $F(3, 248) = 5.01$ ;  $p < 0.005$ , \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table III.**  
Results of hierarchical regression analysis of ALP on distributive justice and self-sacrifice

closely on how their supervisor acts. As such, under these circumstances it becomes increasingly important that the supervisor is regarded as using a leadership style that is beneficial for the organization.

One such perceived style is being self-sacrificial (after all leadership is often in the eye of the beholder, Avolio and Locke, 2002). Leaders high in perceived self-sacrifice show by means of their commitment to pursue valued goals that they are intrinsically motivated to further the interest of the organization and its employees and that they perceive this sacrifice as valuable. In turn, and as the present results suggest, such leader display motivates employees to reciprocate by exhibiting a strong sense of commitment to the organization (Shamir *et al.*, 1993). Another way of reciprocating this self-sacrificial behavior is directed more toward the person of the supervisor (rather than toward the organization) by evaluating this supervisor to be less directive and autocratic (Conger and Kanungo, 1998). Both instances of strong OC and low evaluations of autocratic leadership are seen as important to the welfare and interest of the organization (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1998).

It has to be noted that our results were obtained using a sample of Dutch employees (i.e. being an individualistic culture). Of course, a sample using one culture puts constraints on generalizing the obtained effects and therefore it may be worthwhile to test the interaction between self-sacrifice and distributive justice in other cultures as well. One specific cultural dimension that may be interesting and important to include in such future studies is the collectivistic versus individualistic dimension (Hofstede, 1991). Indeed, with respect to our dependent measure of OC, previous research has shown that the effect of distributive justice differs between collectivistic and individualistic societies. For example, studies in individualistic cultures demonstrated that distributive justice significantly predicted organizational commitment (McFarlin and Sweeney, 1992), whereas studies in collectivistic cultures have not reported such positive and significant relationships (Kim *et al.*, 1990).

Furthermore, and more on an ethical note, leaders appearing to self-sacrifice can be seen as simply trying to satisfy their own self-interest; something that is articulated well in the notion of pseudo transformational leadership (Bass, 1998). To the extent that this practice is accepted may also be a function of the culture one lives in. That is, in Western societies, satisfying one's own interest as a driving force of own behavior is usually socially accepted, whereas in Eastern societies this is not the case (Avolio and Locke, 2002). We wish to note, however, that being perceived as high in self-sacrifice does not necessarily indicate that one is acting in a self-interested way, because common goals are usually only achieved if some people do indeed sacrifice for the welfare of others (Avolio and Locke, 2002). All in all, incorporating cultural dimensions in this type of research may have the potential to significantly enhance our interpretations of both distributive justice and self-sacrifice effects.

A potential limitation of the present study is that we relied on self-report data and a cross-sectional design that limits any causal interpretation of the present effects. Also, the fact that all variables were assessed in a single questionnaire may pose a potential problem of common method variance. However, in our defence it has to be noted that common method variance cannot account for interactions in regression as found in the present study (Evans, 1985). Moreover, the fact that recent experimental research has shown strong effects of both self-sacrifice on identification and commitment measures (De Cremer and van Knippenberg, 2002) and distributive justice on authority

evaluations (Van den Bos *et al.*, 1997) provides evidence in favor of our significant main effects. As such, we are confident that the present results do paint us a rather adequate picture of how self-sacrifice and distributive justice relate to one another.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that it may be a useful guideline to make managers and supervisors more aware of the potential benefits of self-sacrifice for the welfare of the organization, because as practice shows from time to time it is almost inevitable that employees receive outcomes that are, at least in the eyes of the employees, perceived as unfair. In those times, it becomes particularly pressing that supervisors display behaviors that are perceived as valuable and useful towards the interest of the organization and its employees. One possible way to do this is to train managers more effectively in how they can clearly communicate the goals that they personally value and wish their employees to pursue. In order to do this in an effective way it is therefore also important for leaders to be able to be self-reflexive to know what they consider to be worthy of effort and how this is all perceived by the rest of the organization; practices that also lead to healthy individuals in well-functioning organizations (De Vries, 2001).

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