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CHAPTER 3

Why Power Instability Reduces Leaders’ Power Sharing:

The Mediating Role of Distrust

Abstract

Although previous research has identified various beneficial consequences of power sharing, less effort has been made to explain when and why leaders are willing or reluctant to share power with their employees. To address this gap, across five studies, the present research identifies important social and psychological barriers to leaders’ power sharing. Studies 3.1a and 3.1b demonstrate that the instability of a leader’s power position undermines his or her power sharing. Study 3.2 then demonstrates that distrust acts as a key psychological mechanism that can explain this relationship. Then, in Studies 3.3a and 3.3b, we distinguish between two dimensions of distrust and examine the moderating role of employee seniority. We show that power instability hinders leaders’ power sharing because leaders distrust their employees’ benevolence and ability. We further show that employee seniority moderates the indirect association between power instability and power sharing, via benevolence (but not ability) distrust, such that this indirect relationship is more pronounced for relatively senior (compared to junior) employees. Overall, our findings provide valuable insights into when and why leaders are willing to share their power with employees or strive to protect their privileged power position by “clinging to their power”.

Keywords: Power instability, power sharing, benevolence distrust, ability distrust, employee seniority, leadership

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7 This chapter is based on a manuscript under review at Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes.
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Rapidly changing and increasingly competitive working environments have encouraged many of today’s organizations to adopt participative processes and work procedures (Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). In such systems, leaders are urged to share power with their employees by delegating responsibility and authority and by incorporating employees’ ideas into their decisions (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Seibert et al., 2004). The increasing popularity of this type of leadership is unsurprising, considering the wealth of beneficial outcomes associated with power sharing – both for individual employees (e.g., improved job attitudes; Miller & Monge, 1986; Spector, 1986; Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010) and for organizations as wholes (e.g., higher performance; Auh, Menguc, & Jung, 2014; Bradford & Cohen, 1997; Huang, Ian, Liu, & Gong, 2010).

In order to investigate possible antecedents of leaders’ power sharing, the present research focuses on a fundamental element of leadership, namely leaders’ power (i.e., their asymmetric control over valued resources; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Although one can have power without being a leader, leaders typically possess some degree of power due to their formal hierarchical positioning within the organization (Galinsky, Jordan, & Sivanathan, 2008; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Hence, the psychological experience of power is central to leadership and provides key insights to understanding leaders’ behavior (Flynn et al., 2011).

In this regard, social psychological research has shown that having power brings about many individual benefits (e.g., access to important resources, freedom, and prestige; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Galinsky et al., 2003). As a consequence, power holders exhibit a strong tendency toward protecting their privileged positions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). These protective tendencies are especially pronounced when powerful individuals feel that their power is unstable, that is, when they feel that their power could deteriorate in the foreseeable future (Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011; Williams, 2014). For example, the instability of a power holder’s position has been
show to motivate him or her to sabotage team members’ performance in an effort to avert potential power threats (Case & Maner, 2014; Maner & Mead, 2010).

Building on this motivational perspective on power protection (see also Sligte, de Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011), the current research proposes that leaders are less willing to share power with their employees when they feel that their power position is unstable rather than stable. After all, power sharing requires leaders to relinquish authority and control to lower-level employees (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Ratcliff et al., 2015). Hence, the present research extends prior work on the consequences of power instability (Case & Maner, 2014) by examining a different type of outcome variable. We argue that beyond sabotaging team members’ performances (Maner & Mead, 2010), such instability might also make leaders reluctant to rely on employees and, thus, to actively involve them in the decision-making process.

Beyond directly examining behavioral implications associated with a leader’s power instability, a full understanding of the power instability to power sharing relationship requires consideration of its underlying psychological mechanisms. We therefore expand on existing research on the behavioral consequences of power instability (e.g., Maner & Mead, 2010) by investigating the underlying psychological mechanisms that explain why leaders are less willing to share power in unstable rather than stable power positions. We propose that power instability critically shapes leaders’ interpretation of their social environment to be consistent with their motivation to protect their power (Stamkou, Kleef, Fischer, & Kret, 2016). We thus hypothesize that power instability triggers a tendency among leaders to distrust others (Mooijman et al., 2015) and that these increased feelings of distrust, in turn, diminish a leader’s willingness to delegate important decisions and responsibilities to employees (Das & Teng, 2004). Hence, we cast leaders’ distrust as a key mediating mechanism in the relationship between power instability and power sharing.
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The literature further proposes that distrust is not a unidimensional, but rather a multidimensional construct - distinguishing between a cognitive and an affective dimension (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Dimoka, 2010; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). The affective dimension refers to an individual’s perception that others only think about themselves and try to take advantage of the focal individual (i.e., benevolence distrust; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). The cognitive dimension refers to an individual’s perception that others are incompetent and do not have the abilities required for adequate task accomplishment (i.e., ability distrust; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). We propose that these different dimensions of distrust explain leaders’ (lack of) power sharing with different types of employees. Specifically, for relatively senior (vs. junior) employees, due to their more advanced position in the organizational hierarchy, and therefore greater likelihood of near-term promotion (Gordon & Johnson, 1982), we expect that power instability will reduce leaders’ power sharing because leaders distrust these employees’ benevolence (Coleman, 2004; Khan, Moss, Quratulain, & Hameed, 2018). In contrast, for relatively junior (vs. senior) employees, due to their lack of tacit knowledge, expertise, and experience, we expect that power instability will reduce leaders’ power sharing with these employees because leaders distrust these employees’ abilities (Georgesen & Harris, 2006; Leana, 1986). We thus examine both a cognitive and affective route in the power-instability to power-sharing relationship.

The present investigation employs five studies to examine these propositions and, in doing so, it aims to make several important contributions to theory. First, this investigation adds to the growing body of work on how leaders protect and maintain their power positions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Williams, 2014). Although this line of inquiry has illustrated important behavioral consequences of power instability in experimental settings (e.g., Jordan et al., 2011; Maner & Mead, 2010), it has not yet examined the important outcome variable of power sharing. Second, the existing research has not identified key psychological mechanisms underlying behavioral responses following unstable power. By empirically examining the mediating role of distrust, both with
regards to employees’ benevolence and their ability, we aim to provide a fuller understanding of the psychological processes linking power instability to power sharing. Finally, by examining the moderating role of employee seniority, we shine greater light on how different psychological mechanisms explain leader’s (lack of) power sharing with different employees. Overall, the present research aims to identify psychological barriers to leaders’ power sharing, thereby explaining why power sharing, despite its potential benefits, remains so elusive in many of today’s organizations (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015).

Leaders’ Power Instability and Power Sharing

Being in a position of power brings about many benefits for individuals. Relative to those with less power, for example, more powerful persons are less dependent on others, and they can act to a greater extent according to their own goals and desires (Chen et al., 2001; Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2007). Moreover, the powerful have more autonomy (Lammers, Stoker, Rink, & Galinsky, 2016) and control over their surroundings (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009), and they are often respected and admired for their privileged positions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Accordingly, studies have linked power to increased well-being (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013), self-esteem (Wojciszke & Struzynska–Kujalowicz, 2007), and optimism (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012), as well as reduced feelings of stress (Schmid & Schmid Mast, 2013; Sherman et al., 2012) and loneliness (Waytz, Chou, Magee, & Galinsky, 2015).

Given these benefits, being in a position that puts these advantages at risk is stressful for power holders (Feenstra, Jordan, Walter, Yan, & Stoker, 2017; Jordan, Sivanathan, et al., 2011). Consequently, when powerful individuals fear they could lose their power, they typically focus on defending their privileged position, such that “retaining a hold on power will jump to the top priority” (Williams, 2014, p. 1370). Consistent with this reasoning, theory and research on threat-rigidity effects suggest that, “there may be general tendency for individuals to behave rigidly in
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threatening situations” (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981, p. 502), with people becoming less flexible and aiming for more control over their social environment (see also D’Aunno & Sutton, 1992). In fact, several studies have empirically investigated the role of power instability for diverse behavioral outcomes. In an effort to preserve their power, for example, individuals in unstable (rather than stable) power positions have been found to more strongly derogate their working partners (Georgesen & Harris, 1998, 2006), sabotage the functioning of high-performing group members (Case & Maner, 2014; Maner & Mead, 2010), make more conservative decisions (Jordan et al., 2011; Maner, Gailliot, Butz, & Peruche, 2007), and seek greater physical proximity to potentially threatening others (Mead & Maner, 2012).

Building on these insights, we propose that a leader who feels that his or her power is unstable (versus stable) will share less power with his or her employees. After all, power sharing entails relinquishing at least part of one’s power and delegating some of one’s decision-making authority (Kalshoven et al., 2011; Ratcliff et al., 2015). Rather than preserving the existing power distribution, such behavior transfers important resources toward employees and, thus, potentially reduces leaders’ power and further threatens their positions (Coleman, 2004; Tjosvold & Sun, 2006). As illustrated above, however, power preservation is a key behavioral motive for powerful individuals – particularly when they perceive their power positions to be under threat (Williams, 2014). Therefore, we predict:

**Hypothesis 3.1:** The instability of leaders’ power decreases leaders’ power sharing.

**Studies 3.1a and 3.1b**

Studies 3.1a and 3.1b tested Hypothesis 3.1 using experimental research designs. Study 3.1a examined if participants in unstable-power positions would be less willing to share power compared to participants in stable-power positions. In an effort to illustrate that the effects uncovered in Study 3.1a were driven by reduced power sharing in the unstable-power condition (as suggested by Hypothesis 3.1) rather than enhanced power sharing for participants with stable power
(see also Case & Maner, 2014), Study 3.1b then extended this design by including a control condition.

**Methods**

**Participants and design.** Studies 3.1a and 3.1b used experimental scenario designs. In Study 3.1a, we recruited 100 participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Mturk; https://www.mturk.com/). In Study 3.1b, we recruited 230 participants from Prolific Academic (https://prolific.ac/). All participants in Study 3.1a were located in the United States and all participants in Study 3.1b were located in the United Kingdom. We invited participants to take part in a study on workplace behavior in exchange for a monetary compensation. Prior validation studies have shown that such online data collection methods are as reliable as data collected in research labs or field settings (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013; Mason & Suri, 2012; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010; Peer et al., 2017). To further ensure data quality, we included comprehension and instructional manipulation checks (see below).

In Study 3.1a, we excluded nine participants because they had identical IP addresses. We also excluded 11 participants because they failed the comprehension check, whereas no participants failed the instructional manipulation check. Hence, we conducted the analyses using 80 participants (response rate = 80%; \(M_{age} = 35.38, SD = 9.85\); 51% female). Sixty-five percent of these participants worked in an organization at the time of the study. We randomly assigned participants to either an unstable- or a stable-power condition.

In Study 3.1b, we excluded 19 participants because they failed the comprehension check and 29 participants because they failed the instructional manipulation check. Hence, we conducted the analyses using 182 participants (response rate = 79%; \(M_{age} = 36.55, SD = 9.76\); 55% female). Seventy-seven percent of these participants worked in an organization at the time of the study and
55% of them supervised at least one employee. We randomly assigned participants to an unstable-power, stable-power, or control condition.

**Manipulations, procedures, and measures.** Participants responded to all items on a scale from 1 (highly unlikely) to 7 (highly likely). We further note that we have reported all manipulations and measured variables in the sections that follow.

**Power instability.** To manipulate power instability, we first asked participants in both studies to imagine that they were a senior manager of a large company, responsible for supervising more than twenty employees. Moreover, they were told that their position in the organization gave them great power to make independent decisions and placed them at the higher end of the organizational hierarchy (Bowles & Gelfand, 2009; Karelaia & Keck, 2013). On this basis, we subsequently implemented the stable- and unstable-power manipulations (Studies 3.1a and 3.1b), as well as the control condition (Study 3.1b only). In the stable-power condition, participants read that after a talk with a representative from the Human Resources department, they felt that their position in the organizational hierarchy was quite stable and that they would remain in the same position in the near future. In the unstable-power condition, participants read that after a talk with a representative from the Human Resources department, they felt that their position in the organizational hierarchy was quite unstable and that they feared being demoted to a lower position in the near future. In the control condition (Study 3.1b only), participants received no information about the (in)stability of their position.

**Power sharing.** After the manipulations, all participants read a scenario in which they had to decide on a suitable location for a new branch for their company (adapted from Vroom & Jago, 1974). We asked the participants to imagine that they had recently attained a large amount of funding in order to open a new branch. Participants further read that the success of this new branch was very important for their company, and, to a large extent, depended on finding a suitable location. We then used four items referring to this scenario to measure power sharing (adapted from...
Kalshoven et al., 2011). Specifically, we asked the participants to indicate whether they would: “Allow my employees to influence the location of the new branch”; “Delegate the problem of finding a location for the new branch to my employees”; “Reconsider my decision of a suitable location on the basis of recommendations made by my employees”; and “Give my employees the responsibility of finding a suitable location for the new branch” (Study 3.1a, $\alpha = .80$; Study 3.1b, $\alpha = .76$).

**Comprehension and (instructional) manipulation checks.** Following Oppenheimer and colleagues (2009), we included an instructional manipulation check to detect careless responding. That is, we showed participants a paragraph of wordy instructions that eventually told them to ignore the question that appeared in boldface at the bottom of the screen. Additionally, as a comprehension check, we asked the following open-ended question: “For the opening of a new branch for your company; what did you have to decide on?” As indicated before, we only included participants in our final data analyses if (a) they correctly followed the instructional manipulation check and (b) their answer to the comprehension check indicated that they had understood that they had to decide on the new branch’s location.

Further, as a manipulation check, after the measurement of the dependent variable, participants in both studies rated the instability of their power with the following two items: “My position in the organization is quite unstable” and, “I think I will be demoted to a lower position in the near future”. The two items were highly correlated (Study 3.1a: $r = .94$, $p < .001$, $\alpha = .97$; Study 3.1b: $r = .94$, $p < .001$, $\alpha = .97$).

**Results**

**Manipulation check.** Table 3.1 depicts descriptive statistics for Studies 3.1a and 3.1b. The manipulation check for Study 3.1a demonstrated that participants in the unstable-power condition perceived more power instability ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 1.16$), compared to participants in the stable-power condition ($M = 1.40$, $SD = .99$), $t(78) = -19.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.35$. 
Similarly, in Study 3.1b, participants reported different levels of power instability across the three conditions, $F(2,114.22) = 627.53, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .88$.\(^8\) Games-Howell post-hoc tests further revealed that participants in the unstable-power condition perceived more power instability ($M = 6.07, SD = .91$), compared to participants in the stable-power ($M = 1.35, SD = 0.60; 95\% \text{ CI } [4.38, 5.05]$), $p < .001$) and control conditions ($M = 1.77, SD = 0.88; 95\% \text{ CI } [3.92, 4.69], p < .001$). Furthermore, participants in the stable-power condition reported lower power instability than participants in the control condition (95\% CI [-.75, -.09], $p = .008$). Hence, our manipulation of power instability was successful in both studies.

\(^8\) Levene’s test of homogeneity rejected the null hypothesis that variances are equal across conditions, $F(2,179) = 3.13, p = .046$. Therefore, we report Welch’s adjusted ANOVA results and Games-Howell post-hoc tests (Games & Howell, 1976; Welch, 1951).
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Table 3.1

Means (and Standard Deviations) per Condition for Studies 3.1a (top) and 3.1b (bottom)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Study 3.1a; n per</th>
<th>Study 3.1b; n per</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unstable-power</td>
<td>Stable-power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>condition</td>
<td>condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power instability</td>
<td>6.07 (1.16)ₐ</td>
<td>1.40 (0.99)ₘ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power sharing</td>
<td>3.51 (1.11)ₐ</td>
<td>4.07 (1.20)ₘ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 3.1a; n per</th>
<th>Study 3.1b; n per</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power instability</td>
<td>Power sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.07 (0.91)ₐ</td>
<td>3.12 (0.97)ₐ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.35 (0.60)ₘ</td>
<td>3.85 (1.14)ₘ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.77 (0.88)ₘ</td>
<td>3.61 (1.04)ₘ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Within rows, means with different subscripts are significantly different at \( p < .05 \) level based on independent-samples \( t \)-test (for comparisons of two conditions), Games-Howell post-hoc tests (for comparison of power instability among three conditions) or Tukey’s honest significance difference test (for comparison of power sharing among three conditions).

**Hypothesis test.** In line with Hypothesis 3.1, an independent-samples \( t \)-test in Study 3.1a showed that participants in the unstable-power condition \( (M = 3.51, SD = 1.11) \) reported lower willingness to share power than participants in the stable-power condition \( (M = 4.07, SD = 1.20) \), \( t(78) = 2.13, p = .04, d = .48 \). Similarly, for Study 3.1b, a one-way ANOVA showed that participants across the three conditions differed in their willingness to share power, \( F(2,179) = 7.46, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .08 \). Tukey’s honest significance difference test showed that participants in the unstable-power condition \( (M = 3.12, SD = 0.97) \) reported lower power sharing, compared to
participants in both the stable-power ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.14$; 95% CI [-1.18, -.28], $p = .001$) and control ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.04$; 95% CI [-.94, -.03]), $p = .03$) conditions. There was no significant difference, however, between power sharing in the stable-power and control conditions (95% CI [-.69, .20], $p = .41$). Parenthetically, we note that both in Studies 1a and 1b, participants’ age and gender did not influence the pattern of the results or alter our conclusions when included as covariates.

**Discussion**

Supporting Hypothesis 3.1, Studies 3.1a and 3.1b both demonstrated an effect of power instability on power sharing, such that participants reported lower willingness to share power with their employees when their power was unstable rather than stable. The experimental set-up of these studies has noteworthy strengths, allowing us to make causal attributions for the relationship between power instability and power sharing. In addition, we show that these effects hold with participants located on two different continents – North America and Europe. At the same time, this research design may raise questions about our findings’ generalizability toward organizational settings. Moreover, the present studies did not examine why power instability hinders leaders’ power sharing. To address these unanswered questions, we conducted another study in an organizational field setting. Beyond aiming to constructively replicate Studies 3.1a and 3.1b in a more naturalistic context, this study examined leaders’ distrust as a potential mediator to explain the psychological processes linking power instability and power sharing.

**The Mediating Role of Leaders’ Distrust**

As outlined before, powerful individuals generally have a strong motivation to protect their power, and this tendency is particularly pronounced when they perceive their power to be unstable (Case & Maner, 2014; Williams, 2014). Building on this motivational perspective on power protection (see also Sligte et al., 2011), we propose that power instability critically shapes leaders’ social perceptions, which in turn directs their behaviors to be in line with their motivation to protect
their power. Specifically, we suggest that leaders in relatively unstable power positions exhibit greater distrust toward their employees because of the potential threat that these employees could pose. Such distrust, in turn, serves as a key mediator in the power instability-power sharing relationship.

Scholars have argued that distrust contains two critical elements (Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin, & Weibel, 2015; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). First, distrust comprises negative expectations toward others’ intentions and behaviors (i.e., the anticipation that other persons are unwilling and/or unable to act in one’s best interest, Lount & Pettit, 2012; McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Rousseau et al., 1998). And second, these negative expectations form the basis for an individual’s unwillingness to make him- or herself vulnerable to the respective others (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight & Chervany, 2001).

Building on this conceptualization, scholars have described distrust as a possible “resource-protection strategy” (Mooijman et al., 2015, p. 2) for leaders, because trusting others could damage one’s power position and, thus, distrust shields leaders against perceived or actual power threats. When in an unstable power position, in particular, a leader might sense an acute risk that his or her employees will act against their best interests, consequently reducing their willingness to make themselves vulnerable toward employees – the sheer definition of distrust (Williams, 2014). By contrast, a leader who feels that his or her power is secure will view other people’s intentions and behaviors with less suspicion, because his or her position is less vulnerable. Accordingly, compared to leaders who risk losing their power, power-stable leaders hold more positive expectations toward others and, consequently, are more willing to accept vulnerability (i.e., have lesser distrust toward employees).

Corroborating this reasoning, empirical research has shown that power holders’ thinking becomes more vigilant and threat-oriented when their power is unstable (Keltner et al., 2003; Scheepers et al., 2015). In an effort to preempt potential hazards to their position, powerful
individuals who worry about losing their power therefore devote greater attention to others who potentially endanger their power position (Stamkou, Kleef, Fischer, & Kret, 2016). On this basis, we predict that the instability of leaders’ power increases leaders’ distrust.

Moreover, we anticipate that a leader’s distrust, in turn, will be negatively associated with his or her power sharing. As outlined above, distrust involves an individual’s negative expectations toward others and, thus, a pronounced unwillingness to make oneself vulnerable (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Importantly, power sharing has the potential to critically enhance a leader’s vulnerability and to put him or her at greater risk of others’ exploitation. That is, power sharing entails granting authority and decision-making responsibility to employees, increasing a leader’s dependency on employees’ willingness and ability to act on the leader’s behalf and adequately handle important issues (Smith & Barclay, 1997). It is therefore likely that leaders experiencing stronger distrust will be motivated to avoid the risks and uncertainty associated with such behavior and to retain tight control over key decisions and actions (Das & Teng, 2004; Schoorman et al., 2007; Vlaar, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2007). Hence, as compared with more trusting leaders, less trusting leaders are more likely to preserve decision-making authority for themselves, rather than delegating important tasks and responsibilities to others (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Leana, 1986; Yukl & Fu, 1999).

The above theorizing suggests that power instability enhances a leaders’ distrust in others - with such distrust diminishing the respective leader’s power-sharing behavior. Taken together, this conceptual rationale positions leaders’ distrust as a core mediating mechanism to explain the relationship between power instability and power sharing. To formally examine this indirect association, we propose:

_Hypothesis 3.2: Leaders’ distrust mediates the negative relationship between leaders’ power instability and power sharing._

**Study 3.2**
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In a correlational field study among organizational leaders, Study 3.2 tested the mediating role of distrust in the relationship between power instability and power sharing. By doing so, we aimed to replicate the findings of Studies 3.1a and 3.1b in a more naturalistic context and add theoretical understanding by demonstrating why power instability decreases leaders’ power sharing.

Method

Participants and procedure. We approached potential participants via the newsletter and website of a popular management magazine in The Netherlands. This invitation included a link to an online leadership questionnaire that contained measures of power instability, distrust, power sharing, and paranoia (see supplementary analysis described below). We guaranteed participants that their responses were anonymous and confidential. In exchange for their participation, all participants were entered into a raffle for a book gift certificate.

Only individuals who indicated that they currently worked in an organization and supervised other employees could complete the questionnaire. In total, 402 individuals participated in the study. We excluded two participants because they had identical IP addresses. Hence, we conducted the below analyses using 400 participants ($M_{age} = 51.01$, $SD = 8.47$; 35% female). Participants’ average organizational tenure was 13.81 years ($SD = 11.45$) and they were all Dutch. Of the participants, 37.8% supervised between 1 and 10 employees, 21.8% supervised between 11 and 20 employees, and 40.5% supervised more than 20 employees. Finally, participants occupied substantial positions of power in their organizations, with most of the participants representing either top-management (50%) or middle-management positions (42.8%).

Measures. All measures were translated from English to Dutch using a back-translation procedure. Unless indicated otherwise, all measures were accompanied by a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

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9 This questionnaire was part of a larger research project. Hence, after the measures of interest for this study, measures of constructs unrelated to the current research were included.
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**Power instability.** To measure power instability, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they felt that six characteristics of their power in the organization were “*THREATENED - a possibility that they get worse in the future*” (Chandler, Kennedy, & Sandhu, 2007; Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia, 2008; Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2012). Specifically, we asked the participants to indicate their threat perceptions with regard to their position, control, influence, power, authority, and status in the organization (1 = *not at all threatened*, 5 = *threatened to a great extent*; \( \alpha = .94 \)).

**Distrust.** We measured leaders’ distrust with eight items (Carvalho et al., 2015; Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992). We slightly adapted these items such that they applied to an organizational context. Example items were, “In my organization, it is safer to trust no one” and, “I often wonder what hidden reason another person in my organization may have for doing something nice for you” (\( \alpha = .87 \)).

**Power sharing.** We measured leaders’ power sharing with six items from Kalshoven and colleagues (2011). Example items were, “I allow my employees to influence critical decisions” and, “I delegate challenging responsibilities to my employees” (\( \alpha = .79 \)).

**Control variables.** We considered leaders’ age (in years), gender (0 = female, 1 = male), organizational tenure (in years), and power (i.e., operationalized as a leader’s management level [1 = *no management*; 2 = *lower management*; 3 = *middle management*; 4 = *top management*], as a leader’s hierarchical power level [measured on a 0-100 slider scale, with 0 = bottom and 100 = top] and by the number of employees the leader supervised [1 = *between 1 and 5*; 2 = *between 6 and 10*, 3 = *between 11 and 15*; 4 = *between 16 and 20*; and 5 = *more than 20*]; Lammers & Stoker, 2010) as potential control variables, as previous research has shown that they are associated with (some of) our outcome variables (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Jago & Vroom, 1982; Mooijman et al., 2015; Somech, 2003).

**Results**

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**Factor structure.** We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to examine how the data fit our proposed three-factor model, with power instability, distrust, and power sharing as correlated latent factors and no indicator cross-loadings permitted. This model showed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2[167] = 293.66, p < .001$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .044, TLI = .96), and all of the respective survey items loaded significantly on their latent variables (all $p$’s < .001). Furthermore, the three-factor model had a better fit to the data than a one-factor model (in which all items loaded on one latent variable; $\Delta \chi^2 (3) = 1384.38, p < .001$), as well as the best fitting two-factor model ($\Delta \chi^2[2] = 491.39, p < .001$). These findings corroborate our measures’ convergent and discriminant validity.

**Hypotheses tests.** Table 3.2 depicts descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all Study 3.2 variables and Table 3.3 depicts the regression results conducted to test our hypotheses. Analysis revealed that power instability was positively associated with distrust ($B = .30, SE = .03, p < .001, R^2 = .20$) and that distrust, in turn, was negatively associated with power sharing ($B = -.13, SE = .03, p < .001, R^2 = .06$). To formally assess Hypothesis 3.2, we used the SPSS macro ‘PROCESS’ (Hayes, 2012), using a bootstrapping procedure (with 10,000 resamples), as proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008). In accordance with Hypothesis 3.2, this analysis revealed a significant negative indirect association between power instability and power sharing through distrust ($estimate = -.06, 95\% CI [-.09, -.03]$).

Of the potential control variables, leaders’ management position was positively associated with power sharing ($r = .16, p = .001$) and negatively associated with distrust ($r = -.26, p < .001$). Also, leaders’ hierarchical power level was positively associated with power sharing ($r = .14, p = .006$) and negatively associated with distrust ($r = -.24, p < .001$; see Table 2). Hence, we repeated all regression analyses with these variables included as covariates. Results showed that all hypothesized coefficients remained statistically significant and that their direction remained unchanged when incorporating these controls. Similarly, controlling for other potential control variables (i.e., leaders’ age, gender, organizational tenure and/or number of employees leaders
supervised) did not meaningfully change the pattern or significance of the reported results. Overall, our findings support Hypothesis 3.2.
### Table 3.2

**Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study 3.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>51.01</td>
<td>(8.47)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>(0.48)</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Management level</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>(0.67)</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Number of employees</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>(1.61)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hierarchical power</td>
<td>82.90</td>
<td>(18.66)</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Org. tenure</td>
<td>13.81</td>
<td>(11.45)</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Power instability</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.31**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Distrust</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>(0.67)</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Paranoia</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>(0.50)</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.18**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Power sharing</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>(0.53)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.10*</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td>-0.28**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* *N* = 400. *p* < .05  **p* < .01. For gender, 0 = female and 1 = male. For management level, 1 = no management, 2 = lower management, 3 = middle management, and 4 = top management. For number of employees, 1 = between 1-5, 2 = between 6-10, 3 = between 11-15, 4 = between 16-20, and 5 = more than 20 employees.
Table 3.3
Results for the Mediation Analysis of Distrust in the Relationship between Power Instability and Power Sharing for Study 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path / Relationship</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power instability → distrust</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distrust → power sharing</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect relationship</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. N = 400. Coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. The indirect relationship is based on bootstrapping procedure (10,000 samples) proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

Supplementary analyses. To further increase confidence in our proposed conceptual model and to examine the generalizability of our theorizing, we explored the possible mediating role of a more severe form of distrust, namely leaders’ paranoia. Paranoia is a heightened and exaggerated form of distrust that includes individuals’ suspicion that others might exploit or harm them (Kramer, 2001). We expected that, similar to distrust, power instability is associated with increased paranoia among leaders. Such paranoia, in turn, is suggested to diminish leaders’ power sharing.

We measured leaders’ paranoia using eight scenario items adapted from Fenigstein (1984; see Appendix). Each of these scenarios asked participants to imagine themselves in a specific situation (e.g., “You are walking down the hallway at your office when one of your employees walks right by without saying ‘hello’ to you”). After reading a scenario, participants indicated how they would interpret the respective situation. Answer options included both relatively neutral interpretations (e.g., “Your employee was preoccupied and didn’t notice you”) and interpretations indicating paranoid tendencies (e.g., “Your employee wanted to avoid a conversation with you”). Participants assessed the likelihood of either interpretation being valid on a scale from 1 (not at all
likely) to 5 (extremely likely). Following prior research (e.g., Fenigstein, 1984), we used the mean score of the “paranoid” response options as the measure of paranoia ($\alpha = .69$).

As shown in Table 3.4, regression analyses demonstrated that power instability was positively associated with paranoia ($B = .20$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .16$) and that paranoia, in turn, was negatively associated with power sharing ($B = -.15$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .08$). To directly assess the mediating role of paranoia in the relationship between power instability and power sharing, we again used the bootstrapping procedure proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008; with 10,000 resamples). Supporting our expectations, this analysis revealed a significant negative indirect relationship between power instability and power sharing, through paranoia ($B = -.06$, 95% CI [-.09, -.04]). Hence, these supplementary findings indicated that a more extreme form of distrust also serves as a mediating mechanism in the power instability – power sharing relationship.

Table 3.4

Results for the Mediation Analysis of Paranoia in the Relationship between Power Instability and Power Sharing for Study 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path / Relationship</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>95% CI Lower</th>
<th>95% CI Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power instability $\rightarrow$ paranoia</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranoia $\rightarrow$ power sharing</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect relationship</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. $N = 400$. Coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. The indirect relationship is based on bootstrapping procedure (10,000 samples) proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008).
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Discussion

Study 3.2 extended the findings of Studies 3.1a and 3.1b by examining the relationship between power instability and power sharing in an organizational field setting and by demonstrating the mediating role of distrust (and paranoia) in this regard. By doing so, we shine greater light on a key underlying mechanism that explains why leaders in relatively unstable positions share less power with their employees than leaders in more stable power positions.

That said, some unanswered questions remain. First, our cross-sectional research design does not allow for causal conclusions. Although we hypothesized that leaders in unstable power positions distrust others more than leaders in stable positions, the current study cannot rule out the alternative direction of our hypothesized effect or the impact of confounding variable affecting our constructs. Hence, in order to support our causal claims, in the following study we will examine the impact of power instability for distrust using an experimental research design. Another limitation of the current study is that we measured general distrust toward others in the organization, as opposed to capturing individualized distrust toward leaders’ employees, in particular.

Furthermore, the present study has taken a rather “broad brush” examination of distrust. Research shows, however, that distrust is a multi-dimensional construct (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Specifically, scholars have argued that distrust contains both an affective (i.e., emotional construal of another individual’s intent to exert harm on the focal individual) and cognitive dimension (i.e., an individual’s rational construal of another individual’s ability to successfully complete a task; Dimoka, 2010; Rousseau et al., 1998). In this study, although the scale we used was a general distrust scale, the items appear to capture more of an affective dimension of distrust than a cognitive dimension (e.g., “Some people in my organization have tried to steal my ideas and take credit for them” and, “Most people in my organization will use somewhat unfair means to gain profit or an advantage, rather than lose it”).
Thus, in the studies that follow, we measure distrust toward leaders’ employees and examine the possible mediating role of a cognitive form of distrust (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Moreover, as it seems likely that these different forms of distrust will be differently applicable towards different employees, we examine how a relevant characteristic of employees (i.e., seniority level) moderates these indirect relationships.

**Benevolence Distrust, Ability Distrust, and the Moderating Role of Employee Seniority**

**Leaders’ Benevolence and Ability Distrust**

Following previous research (Bhattacherjee, 2002; McKnight & Chervany, 2001) we distinguish between two dimensions of distrust. First, benevolence distrust refers to an emotional assessments of another person’s ill will (Dimoka, 2010; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Second, ability distrust is based on a negative cognitive assessment of another person’s capabilities (Dimoka, 2010; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Building on research that has shown that individuals with unstable power are motivated to protect their power (Sligte et al., 2011; Williams, 2014), we propose that both dimensions of distrust mediate the relationship between power instability and power sharing. In a first step toward unravelling the potential mediating role of benevolence and ability distrust, we will first examine how power instability may directly affect leaders’ respective distrust dimensions.

We first argue that power instability increases leaders’ distrust in their employees’ benevolence. As mentioned before, power instability makes leaders focus on protecting their power (Williams, 2014). Hence, powerful individuals who are worried about losing their power are likely to fixate on how their employees could further endanger their precarious position (Keltner et al., 2003; Scheepers et al., 2015). One important way in which employees could represent a danger, in this regard, is by deliberately trying to topple the leader’s power in an effort to usurp his or her role (Khan et al., 2018). Hence, when placed in an unstable power position, a leader might sense an acute risk that his or her employees could self-servingly act against the leader’s best interests, thus
heightening a leader’s benevolence distrust. In contrast, a leader who feels that his or her power is relatively stable will be less likely to interpret employees’ intentions and behaviors with such suspicious motives (Keltner et al., 2003; Scheepers et al., 2015), thereby preventing feelings of benevolence distrust toward employees. Hence, we predict:

**Hypothesis 3.3a:** The instability of leaders’ power increases leaders’ benevolence distrust.

Second, in addition to endangering a leader’s power position by intentionally seeking to sabotage the leader, employees could seriously (albeit unintentionally) damage a leader’s power position by mishandling important tasks and decisions due to sheer incompetence (Mayer et al., 1995). Even when they share power, leaders typically bare final accountability for their team’s outcomes (Yukl & Fu, 1999). As such, they may face substantive repercussions when employees cannot meet goals due to insufficient abilities. Hence, the potential that a leader’s employees will not be qualified to handle important task as well as the leader would handle them him- or herself may pose a significant threat. Accordingly, we propose that leaders in unstable power positions are particularly distrusting of the abilities of their employees (Georgesen & Harris, 1998). By contrast, a leader who feels that his or her power is relatively stable should be less preoccupied with subordinates’ potential inability to deliver on their task (Georgesen & Harris, 2006), because such inability is less likely to harm the leader’s position in the organizational hierarchy. Overall, we thus propose that power instability makes leaders more distrustful their employees’ abilities. We thus hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 3.3b:** The instability of leaders’ power increases leaders’ ability distrust.

**Study 3.3a**

Study 3.3a empirically tested Hypotheses 3.3a and 3.3b using an experimental research design. We examined whether participants in an unstable power position exhibited greater distrust toward their employees’ benevolence and ability, as compared to participants in a stable power position and in a control condition.
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Method.

Participants and design. We recruited 231 participants via Prolific Academic (we ensured that these individuals had not participated in Study 3.1b), in exchange for a small monetary compensation. All participants were located in the United States. We excluded six participants because they had identical IP addresses and 13 participants because they failed the instructional manipulation check (see below). Hence, we conducted our final data analyses using 212 participants (response rate = 92%; $M_{age} = 37.25, SD = 9.68; 41\%$ female). Ninety-seven percent of the final sample worked in an organization at the time of the study and, of these, 45% supervised at least one employee. We randomly assigned participants to an unstable-power, stable-power, or control condition.

Manipulations, procedures, and measures. Participants responded to all items on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). We further note that we have reported all manipulations and measured variables in the sections that follow.

Power instability. We administered the same power instability manipulation as in Study 3.1b. Specifically, we asked participants to imagine that they were a senior manager of a large company and that they felt that after a talk with a representative from the Human Resources department their position in the organizational hierarchy was quite stable (unstable). As in Study 3.1b, participants in the control condition received no information about the (in)stability of their position.

Distrust. Following the manipulation, we measured participants’ benevolence and ability distrust toward their employees with four items each (adapted from Mayer & Davis, 1999). Example items for benevolence distrust were, “I would be concerned that my employees do not care about my welfare” and, “I would be concerned that my employees would try to take advantage of me” ($\alpha = .92$). Example items for ability distrust were, “I would be concerned that my employees
are incapable of handling important tasks” and, “I would be concerned that my employees would lack knowledge about critical decisions” ($\alpha = .96$).  

*(Instructional) manipulation checks.* We included the same instructional manipulation check as in Studies 3.1a and 3.1b (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). Furthermore, as a check for our manipulation, we measured perceived power instability with the same two items as in Studies 3.1a and 3.1b ($r = .95$, $p < .001$, $\alpha = .97$).

**Results.**

**Manipulation check.** Table 3.5 depicts descriptive statistics for Study 3.3a. The manipulation check revealed that participants across the three conditions differed in their perceived power instability, $F(2, 209) = 599.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .85$. As expected, Tukey’s honest significance difference test showed that participants in the unstable-power condition perceived more power instability ($M = 6.37$, $SD = 1.03$) compared to participants in the stable-power ($M = 1.49$, $SD = 1.11$; 95% CI [4.49, 5.26]), $p < .001$) and control ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .71$; 95% CI [4.45, 5.21], $p < .001$) conditions. Hence, our manipulation of power instability was successful. Furthermore, there were no differences for power instability between the stable-power and control conditions (95% CI [-.43, .34], $p = .96$).

---

10 In addition to benevolence and ability distrust, researchers have examined integrity distrust (i.e., the perception that another person does not adhere to important values and rules; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Although we do not expect power instability to impact leaders’ integrity distrust, for completeness we also measured this distrust dimension. As expected, analysis revealed that power instability does not impact integrity distrust, $F(1, 209) = .53$, $p = .59$.  

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Table 3.5

Means (and Standard Deviations) per Condition for Study 3.3a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unstable-power condition</th>
<th>Stable-power condition</th>
<th>Control condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n per cell</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power instability</td>
<td>6.37 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.49 (1.11)</td>
<td>1.54 (0.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolence distrust</td>
<td>3.77 (1.52)</td>
<td>3.14 (1.43)</td>
<td>3.12 (1.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability distrust</td>
<td>3.58 (1.76)</td>
<td>3.28 (1.67)</td>
<td>3.14 (1.76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Within rows, means with different subscripts are significantly different at \( p < .05 \) level based on Tukey’s honest significance difference test.

**Hypotheses tests.** To test Hypotheses 3.3a and 3.3b, we used a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with condition as the independent variable and benevolence and ability distrust as dependent variables. The analysis showed a marginally-significant multivariate effect, \( F(4, 418) = 2.11, p = .078, \eta_p^2 = .02 \). Further, a univariate ANOVA revealed a main effect of power instability on benevolence distrust, \( F(2, 209) = 4.16, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04 \). In support of Hypothesis 3.3a, Tukey’s honest significance difference tests showed that participants reported higher benevolence distrust in the unstable-power condition (\( M = 3.77, SD = 1.52 \)), compared to the stable-power (\( M = 3.14, SD = 1.43; 95\% CI [.01, .80], p = .04 \)) and control conditions (\( M = 3.12, SD = 1.61, 95\% CI [.03, .81], p = .03 \)). There was no difference between the stable-power and control conditions (95\% CI [-.40, .38], \( p = .99 \)). Contrary to Hypothesis 3.3b, however, ANOVA results for ability distrust indicated no significant differences between the three conditions, \( F(2, 209) = 1.22, p = .30, \eta_p^2 = .01 \). Including participants’ age and gender as covariates did not influence the pattern of the results or alter our conclusions for either analysis.
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**Discussion.** The findings of Study 3.3a support Hypothesis 3.3a, showing that the instability of leaders’ power increases leaders’ distrust regarding their employees’ benevolence. In contrast, our findings do not support Hypothesis 3.3b, as we observed no differences between conditions for ability distrust. Hence, this study provides preliminary evidence for the value of distinguishing between benevolence and ability distrust when examining distrust as a mediator in the power-instability to power-sharing relationship and that the affective dimension (i.e., benevolence distrust) is particularly important in this regard.

At the same time, this study is unable to draw conclusions beyond the power-instability to distrust direct relationship. Thus, we still need to include a measure of power sharing and test the full mediation pathways. Second, in Study 3a, we did not explore the possibility of moderating variables. Research suggests that due to employees’ specific qualities or characteristics, different employees pose different threats to leaders’ power positions (Khan et al., 2018). Hence, it seems particularly important to investigate the moderating role of employee characteristics in this regard. In fact, such moderating factors might explain the unexpected findings uncovered for ability distrust. Hence, in order to address these limitations, the following study, examines the full mediation pathways of benevolence and ability distrust and simultaneously explores employee seniority as a moderating variable.

**The Moderating Role of Employee Seniority**

Thus far, we have hypothesized that in an effort to protect their power, leaders who perceive that their power is unstable will distrust their employees and therefore, will be less willing to involve them in decision-making processes and delegate important tasks. Also, we have proposed two dimensions of distrust as mechanisms for this relationship. Importantly, however, it seems unlikely that these mechanisms apply uniformly to all employees. Hence, although we believe that leaders in unstable power positions are generally unwilling to share power with their employees,
we propose that the reasons why power instability hinders leaders’ power sharing differs depending on a key employee characteristic: employees’ seniority level.

Seniority is an important predictor of leaders’ power sharing, as leaders are typically more likely to depend on, and share power with, their more senior employees (Yukl & Fu, 1999). At the same time, however, relatively senior employees (compared to more junior employees) generally occupy higher-level positions and are entitled to numerous employee benefits, such as higher salaries, job security, and advancement opportunities (Gordon & Johnson, 1982). Leaders who worry about losing their power might therefore perceive these senior, more highly-positioned employees, as having a greater chance to usurp the threatened leader’s role during times of instability (Khan et al., 2018). Hence, sharing power with such employees (as compared to more junior employees) might be a riskier bet for leaders whose power is already unstable, because doing so would mean that they give power to employees that both have the potential and the position to take over their position (Coleman, 2004; Tjosvold & Sun, 2006). In accordance, we propose that when considering senior (but not junior) employees, leaders who feel that their power is unstable are less willing to share power because they distrust these employees’ benevolence. We therefore hypothesize:

_Hypothesis 3.4a: Employee seniority moderates the indirect association between power instability and power sharing via leaders’ benevolence distrust, such that benevolence distrust only mediates this indirect linkage for relatively senior (as opposed to junior) employees._

Relatively junior employees, on the other hand, have little working experience and a relatively low hierarchical position within their teams (Gordon & Johnson, 1982). These employees could thus potentially damage the leader as well, not because of the direct threat they pose to the power position of the leader, but because of their incompetence to carry out tasks that the leader delegates to them (Mayer et al., 1995). As such, sharing power with such employees (relative to more senior employees) might be particularly risky for leaders in an unstable power position,
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because these employees could unsuccessfully handle important tasks and decisions (Leana, 1986).
Taken together, we thus argue that when considering junior (but not senior) employees, leaders who feel that their power is unstable are less willing to share power because they distrust these employees’ abilities. We therefore hypothesize:

_Hypothesis 3.4b:_ Employee seniority moderates the indirect association between power instability and power sharing via leaders’ ability distrust, such that ability distrust only mediates this indirect linkage for relatively junior (as opposed to senior) employees.

**Study 3.3b**

Study 3.3b empirically tested Hypotheses 3.4a and 3.4b using an online sample of organizational leaders. In order to extend the findings of Study 3.3a, we incorporated leaders’ benevolence distrust and ability distrust as mediators in the relationship between power instability and power sharing, and we simultaneously examined the moderating role of employee seniority for these indirect associations.

**Method.**

**Participants and procedure.** As we were interested in leaders’ power sharing with different employees, individuals were only eligible to partake in this study if they supervised more than one employee. We contacted possible participants via Qualtrics Online Panel (https://www.qualtrics.com/online-sample/; Bartneck, Duenser, Moltchanova, & Zawieska, 2015). We first verified whether all of respondents held a formal organizational leadership position. In total, 257 eligible participants completed our study. We excluded 23 of them because they failed the instructional manipulation check (see below). Hence, we conducted our final analyses using 234 participants (response rate = 91%; $M_{age} = 43.48$, $SD = 12.38$; 62% female). All participants were located in the United States, and they worked in a wide variety of sectors (e.g., manufacturing, retail, public, business). Their organizational tenure was, on average, 10.93 years ($SD = 7.56$). All participants occupied a formal leadership position (27% lower management, 64%
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middle management, and 9% top management). Furthermore, 60% of the final sample directly supervised between 2 and 10 employees, 22% between 11 and 20, and 18% more than 20 employees.

All participants received an e-mail containing a link to a secure online questionnaire, which asked them to take part in a study about their experiences in the workplace and with their employees. We randomly asked half of the participants to think about either a very junior or a very senior employee (i.e., an employee with very little/a lot of experience who occupies a relatively low/high position within the team), and to report the first name of this employee. Subsequently, the participants answered several questions about this focal employee.

**Measures.** Unless indicated otherwise, all measures were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We further note that we have reported all measured variables in the sections that follow.

*Power instability.* As in Study 3.2, we measured power instability by asking leaders to rate the extent to which they felt that five aspects of their power (i.e., control, position, influence, power, and authority) were threatened, using a scale from 1 (not at all threatened) to 7 (threatened to a great extent; $\alpha = .95$).

*Employee seniority.* We asked leaders to indicate the seniority level of the focal employee on a scale from 1 (very junior – low position) to 10 (very senior – high position).

*Distrust.* As in Study 3.3a, we measured leaders’ benevolence and ability distrust toward the focal employee with four items each (adapted from Mayer & Davis, 1999; $\alpha = .93$ and $\alpha = .94$, respectively).

---

11 In Study 3.2 we additionally included an item about “status in my organization”. As we are interested only in leaders’ perceptions of their power position, and not their status position, we did not measure this item in Study 3.3b. We further note that excluding this item in Study 3.2’s analyses does not meaningfully change the presented results.
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Power sharing. As in Study 3.2, we measured leaders’ power sharing with the focal employee with six items from Kalshoven et al. (2011; α = .86).

Control variables. We considered leaders’ age (in years), gender (0 = female, 1 = male), organizational tenure (in years), relationship tenure with the focal employee (in years) and power (i.e., operationalized as a leader’s management level [1 = no management; 2 = lower management; 3 = middle management; 4 = top management], as a leader’s hierarchical power level [measured on a 0-100 slider], and by the number of employees the leader supervised [1 = between 1 and 5; 2 = between 6 and 10; 3 = between 11 and 15; 4 = between 16 and 20; and 5 = more than 20]; Lammers, Stoker, & Stapel, 2010) as previous research has shown that they are associated with some of our outcome variables (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Jago & Vroom, 1982; Leana, 1986; Mooijman et al., 2015; Somech, 2003).

Results.

Measurement model. We used CFAs to examine the factor structure of our measured study variables. A four-factor model (with power instability, benevolence distrust, ability distrust, and power sharing as correlated latent factors, all items loading on their suggested latent factors, and no item cross-loadings allowed) showed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 [146] = 236.67, p < .001$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .05, TLI = .97), and all items loaded significantly on their latent variables ($p < .001$). Furthermore, the four-factor model had a better fit to data than a one-factor model (in which all items loaded on the same latent variable; $\Delta \chi^2 [6] = 1954.15, p < .001$) as well as the best fitting two-factor model (i.e., with the items of power instability loading on one latent factor and all other items loading on a second latent factor; $\Delta \chi^2 [5] = 848.79, p < .001$) and three-factor model (i.e., with the items of ability distrust and power sharing loading on one latent factor, the items of power instability loading on a second latent factor, and the items of distrust benevolence loading on a third latent factor; $\Delta \chi^2 [3] = 306.59, p < .001$).
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**Hypotheses tests.** Table 3.6 depicts descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for Study 3.3b’s variables. As shown, employee seniority was negatively related with leaders’ benevolence distrust \( r = -0.20, p = .002 \) as well as ability distrust \( r = -0.47, p < .001 \), whereas employee seniority was positively related with power sharing \( r = 0.58, p < .001 \). Furthermore, there was a relatively high correlation between benevolence and ability distrust \( r = 0.60, p < .001 \). Hence, we tested our hypotheses regarding benevolence and ability distrust in separate regression analyses.
Table 3.6
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study 3.3b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>43.48</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>.38 (.49)</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Management level</td>
<td>2.82 (0.57)</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Number of employees</td>
<td>2.50 (1.53)</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hierarchical power</td>
<td>59.38 (24.32)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Organizational tenure</td>
<td>10.93 (7.56)</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Supervisor-subordinate tenure</td>
<td>4.86 (5.67)</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Power instability</td>
<td>2.34 (1.28)</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Employee seniority</td>
<td>5.16 (3.23)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Benevolence distrust</td>
<td>2.68 (1.49)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Ability distrust</td>
<td>2.97 (1.66)</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>-.47**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Power sharing</td>
<td>4.43 (1.21)</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>-.59**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. N ranges from 233 to 234. *p < .05 **p < .01. For gender, 0 = female and 1 = male. For management level, 1 = no management, 2 = lower management, 3 = middle management, and 4 = top management. For number of employees, 1 = between 1-5, 2 = between 6-10, 3 = between 11-15, 4 = between 16-20, and 5 = more than 20 employees.
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In a first step, we explored the mediating role of benevolence and ability distrust without accounting for employee seniority (see Tables 3.7 and 3.8). Analysis revealed that power instability was positively associated with both benevolence distrust ($B = .45$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$) and ability distrust ($B = .33$, $SE = .11$, $p = .003$). Moreover, both benevolence distrust ($B = -.30$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) and ability distrust ($B = -.44$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) were negatively associated with power sharing. To further assess the mediating role of benevolence and ability distrust, we used the SPSS macro ‘PROCESS’ (Hayes, 2012), using a bootstrapping procedure (with 10,000 resamples), as proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Results showed that both benevolence and ability distrust mediated the negative relationship between power instability and power sharing ($estimate$ for benevolence $= -.13$, $SE = .04$, $95\%$ CI $[-.23, -.07]$; $estimate$ for ability $= -.14$, $SE = .05$, $95\%$ CI $[-.24, -.05]$).

Table 3.7

Results for the Mediation Analysis of Benevolence Distrust in the Relationship between Power Instability and Power Sharing in Study 3.3b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path / Relationship</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$SE$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power instability → benevolence distrust</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolence distrust → power sharing</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect relationship</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. $N = 234$. Coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. The indirect relationship is based on bootstrapping procedure (10,000 samples) proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008).
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Table 3.8

Results for the Mediation Analysis of Ability Distrust in the Relationship between Power Instability and Power Sharing in Study 3.3b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path / Relationship</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power instability (\rightarrow) ability distrust</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td>.11 .54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability distrust (\rightarrow) power sharing</td>
<td>-.44</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>-.52 -.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect relationship</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.24 -.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. \(N = 234\). Coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. The indirect relationship is based on bootstrapping procedure (10,000 samples) proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

Moreover, we used Model 7 of the SPSS macro ‘PROCESS’ to test our moderated mediation hypotheses (based on 10,000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2012; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007; see Tables 3.9 and 3.10). The index of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2012) showed that the indirect relationship between power instability and power sharing, via benevolence distrust, was moderated by employee seniority (\(index = -.07, SE = .03, 95\% CI = [-.14, -.02]\)). Supporting Hypothesis 3.4a, this negative indirect relationship was only significant for relatively senior employees (+ 1 SD; \(estimate = -.20, SE = .05, 95\% CI = -.31, -.11\)), but not for relatively junior employees (- 1 SD; \(estimate = -.07, SE = .05, 95\% CI [-.18, .01]\)).
Table 3.9

Results for the Moderation Mediation Analysis with Benevolence Distrust (Mediator) and Employee Seniority (Moderator) Predicting Power Sharing in Study 3.3b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B (SE)</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model with mediator variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power instability</td>
<td>.45 (.09)**</td>
<td>.27, .62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee seniority</td>
<td>-.27 (.09)**</td>
<td>-.45, -.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power instability × employee seniority</td>
<td>.23 (.09)**</td>
<td>.05, .41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model with dependent variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.13**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolence distrust</td>
<td>-.30 (.05)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power instability</td>
<td>.09 (.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of moderated mediation</td>
<td>-.07 (.03)</td>
<td>-.14, -.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. \( N = 234 \). Coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. Results are based on 10,000 bootstrap samples proposed by Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007. ***\( p < .001 \), **\( p < .01 \).

Similarly, the index of moderated mediation showed that the indirect relationship between power instability and power sharing, via ability distrust, was also moderated by employee seniority (\( index = -.09, SE = .04, 95\% CI = [-.17, -.003] \)). Contrary to Hypothesis 3.4b, however, the negative indirect effect was only significant with regards to relatively senior employees (+ 1 SD; \( B = -.22, SE = .06, 95\% CI = -.35, -.12 \)), but not relatively junior employees (- 1 SD; \( B = -.07, SE = .04, 95\% CI [-.18, .06] \)). Hence, Hypothesis 3.4b was not supported.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) We note that we obtained a similar pattern of findings (such that Hypothesis 3.4a was supported and Hypothesis 3.4b was not) when using a binary conceptualization of employee seniority (i.e., based on whether a participant was asked to think about a junior or a senior employee; 0 = junior, 1 = senior) rather than the continuous seniority measure. We further note that the association between benevolence distrust and power sharing, and hence, the
As shown in Table 3.6, of the potential control variables, only leaders’ age (in years) the number of employees that leaders supervise, and leaders’ relationship tenure with the focal employee correlated with some, or all, of the outcome variables. Hence, we repeated all regression analyses with these variables as covariates. Results showed that for benevolence distrust, none of the reported results or conclusions were meaningfully affected by the inclusion of these covariates. For ability distrust, however, the respective (unexpected) index of moderated mediation was no longer significant when including these controls \((index = -.06, SE = .04; 95\% CI [-.14, .008])\). Moderated mediation index with benevolence distrust, is no longer significant when examining benevolence and ability distrust in a single regression analysis. There are no meaningfully changes in the significance levels or patterns of the reported results for ability distrust when including benevolence distrust.
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Moreover, we note that inclusion of the other potential control variables did not alter the pattern of the results or influence our substantive conclusions.

Discussion.

Study 3.3b examined our full moderated mediation model. Analyses revealed that both benevolence and ability distrust mediated the relationship between power instability and power sharing. Moreover, leaders generally exhibited less distrust toward more senior employees and were more willing to share power with these employees. Findings further showed that employee seniority moderated the indirect relationship between power instability and power sharing, via benevolence distrust, such that benevolence distrust only mediated this indirect relationship for relatively senior employees. In contrast, employee seniority did not moderate the indirect relationship between power instability and power sharing through ability distrust. Overall, the findings of this study provide a better understanding of the psychological processes linking power instability to power sharing and the boundary conditions that shape such indirect effects. This study, however, also has some noteworthy limitations. Most importantly, the cross-sectional research design prevents causal inferences and raises possible concerns about common method bias. We note, however, that common method variance is unlikely to account for the interactive pattern of relationships we have obtained (Evans, 1985; Siemsen et al., 2010) and that our previous experimental studies ameliorate some of these concerns.

General Discussion

The present research employed five studies across populations in three countries to examine the role of leaders’ power instability for their power sharing. The first two studies showed that the instability of leaders’ power decreased their power sharing. In a third study, we then examined the underlying mechanism for the power instability to power sharing association, and we showed the crucial role of distrust. The final two studies aimed to further examine the nuances of the mediating role of distrust. Our results suggest that power instability hinders leaders’ power sharing because it
leads them to distrust their employees’ benevolence and abilities. Finally, we focused on seniority as an important moderating employee characteristic and showed that the indirect association between power instability and power sharing, via benevolence distrust (but not ability distrust), is moderated by employee seniority, such that it is more pronounced for relatively senior (compared to junior) employees.

**Theoretical Contributions**

These findings make several important theoretical contributions. First, this study contributes to the development of a coherent body of evidence demonstrating that power instability critically shapes leaders’ behaviors to be consistent with their motivation to protect their power (cf. Maner & Mead, 2010; Williams, 2014). Specifically, our findings suggest that leaders’ reluctance toward power sharing represents a motivated attempt to protect their unstable power and preserve the benefits associated with it.

Moreover, our findings extend this important line of work by identifying key psychological mechanisms underlying the behavioral consequences of power instability. Whereas power itself typically promotes a more optimistic outlook (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006b; Keltner et al., 2003), our results demonstrate that power instability makes leaders distrustful of their employees’ intentions and behaviors. These increased feelings of distrust, in turn, make leaders unwilling to delegate important decisions-making authority to them. Moreover, our findings suggest that the behavioral consequences of power instability are driven by both emotional processes of leaders worrying that their employees will deliberately do something to harm them and usurp their positions, as well as more rationale processes by which leaders worry about employees’ lack of abilities. We thus demonstrate both an affective and cognitive route in the power-instability to power-sharing relationship.

Our results build on the results of Maner and colleagues, who showed that leaders in unstable power positions sabotage their team members’ performance (i.e., Case & Maner, 2014;
Maner & Mead, 2010). Comparing the results in detail reveals some noteworthy differences. Specifically, an important distinction is that Maner et al. adopted an experimental paradigm in which a leaders’ power instability was a direct result of their group members’ good performance. As such, in these studies, leaders in unstable power positions worried that group members would again perform well, resulting in leaders sabotaging highly qualified group members’ performance. Our theorizing and results extend this line of work, as we show that, at least in organizational settings, leaders in unstable power positions may also worry about their employees’ poor performance. This makes sense considering that in organizations in particular, leaders’ power positions are not so much threatened by employees’ good performance, but more by employees’ potentially poor performance, as leaders’ are ultimately the ones responsible and held accountable for the outcomes of their teams (Yukl, 2012).

Furthermore, our findings on the moderating role of seniority provide initial steps toward a more nuanced, dyadic understanding of the consequences of leaders’ power instability. Our findings suggest that to fully understand the reasons why power instability hinders leaders’ power sharing, one should take into account characteristics of employees as well. Particularly, our results show that leaders in unstable power positions are unwilling to share power with all of their employees (both senior and junior), because leaders worry that their employees might lack important qualities and abilities. For senior employees, in particular, power instability further hinders leaders’ power sharing because leaders worry that senior employees might take advantage of them and topple their privileged power-positions.

Lastly, our findings have important implications for organizational research on trust and distrust. To date, this line of inquiry has predominantly examined how trust can be developed and sustained (e.g., Mayer et al., 1995). This focus on trust (instead of distrust) is likely the result of the fact that most research has implicitly assumed that trust and distrust are opposite ends of the same conceptual spectrum (Cho, 2006). A growing body of work suggests, however that trust and
distrust are two distinct constructs that have different predictors (e.g., Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015; Dimoka, 2010). In light of these findings researchers have called for more research on the development of distrust (Cho, 2006). Our findings shine more light on this important issue by showing the impact of power instability for shaping leaders’ distrust.

**Practical Contributions**

The current findings also offer relevant practical implications for organizations. In particular, when striving to empower their workforce, our findings suggest that organizations should pay specific attention to the instability of leaders’ power positions. Although complete positional security is virtually impossible, and could potentially induce feelings of entitlement and evoke related problems (e.g., misuse of power and moral hypocrisies; Jongenelen & Vonk, 2007; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010), organizations that strive to encourage more power sharing among their leaders should enhance leaders’ feelings of security and stability with regards to their future within the organization. Organizations could increase such perceptions of security and stability, for example, by utilizing longer employment contract times (Cuyper & Witte, 2006), offering support for internal career opportunities, and/or by ensuring that organizational processes and procedures (e.g., promotion and demotion decisions) are fair and transparent (García-Izquierdo, Moscoso, & Ramos-Villagrasa, 2012; Loi, Lam, & Chan, 2012).

Moreover, organizations aiming to promote their leaders’ power sharing seem advised to reduce an atmosphere of distrust. First, organizations should increase leaders’ confidence in their employees’ abilities by, for instance, coaching their leaders to trust their employees (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014). Furthermore, to increase leaders’ power sharing with more senior employees, in particular, organizations should tackle leaders’ perceptions that their employees are selfish and out to hurt the leader (i.e., benevolence distrust). Organizations could strengthen leaders’ perceptions of employees’ benevolence, by, for example, fostering cohesion among leaders and their senior employees (Gilbert & Tang, 1998).
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Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current research is not without limitations. First, Studies 3.1a, 3.1b, and 3.3a asked participants to imagine themselves in a more or less stable power position and to indicate how they would act. On the one hand, this experimental approach allows us draw causal conclusions and is thus beneficial in terms of internal validity. On the other hand, scenario methodology raises questions about participants’ ability to adequately picture themselves in the respective situation and assess their actual behavioral reactions, possibly creating external validity concerns. Notably, Studies 3.2 and 3.3b’s replication of these experimental findings in survey-based field settings, using online samples of organizational leaders, attenuates these concerns. Given their cross-sectional, single-source designs, however, Study 2 and Study 3b cannot warrant causal claims by themselves (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Overall, we believe the multi-study design employed in this research is a distinct strength, because it counterbalances many of the weaknesses associated with each of the individual studies. Nevertheless, we believe additional studies would be worthwhile to further corroborate our conclusions. Such research could include experimental studies with behavioral outcome measures, for example, or correlational field studies with multiple measurement sources and/or longitudinal designs.

Second, we note some inconsistencies in our findings. While our predictions regarding benevolence distrust were all supported, we obtained mixed support for our predictions regarding ability distrust. Particularly, adopting an experimental research design, in Study 3.3a, we found no support that power instability impacts leaders’ ability distrust. We did, however, find support for a mediating role of ability distrust for the power-instability to power-sharing association in an organizational field setting (i.e., Study 3.3b). In this later study, however, we found no support that the indirect linkage between power-instability and power sharing via ability distrust was qualified by seniority level of the employee. Overall, we thus acknowledge that conclusions regarding the
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role of ability distrust warrant particular caution and that future research should further examine the role of ability distrust in explaining the impact of power instability for power sharing.

Third, although the present research examined the mediating role of two dimensions of distrust (i.e., benevolence and ability), future research could expand on the present model by examining other types of mediators for the power instability - power sharing relationship. In addition to distrust, a leader’s motivation to demonstrate competence could, for instance, mediate this relationship, with leaders who fear that they might lose their power positions being particularly eager to demonstrate their own competence, and hence, preferring to handle important tasks and decisions themselves (Harter, 1978; Kanfer, 1990).

Similarly, while the present research examined the moderating role of employee seniority, future research could expand the current model by examining additional moderating variables. The organizational context in which leaders and employees find themselves, for instance, might prove to be particular important in this regard (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). It is possible that in a competitive working environment in which leaders are fostered to see their employees as competitors (Tjosvold, 1988, 1998), leaders perceive power sharing more as a zero-sum phenomenon (i.e., if you share power with others, you lose power yourself; Coleman, 2004). Hence, in such competitive contexts, power instability might increase an atmosphere of distrust, and consequently diminish a leader’s power sharing. In more cooperative work settings, by contrast power sharing might be perceived as more beneficial to leaders’ power positions, and hence, power instability might not hinder leaders’ power sharing to the same extent.

Moreover, our theorizing and measures exclusively focused on negative forms of power instability (i.e., expected power loss or power threat). Future research could build on our insights by also investigating positive forms of power instability, as reflected in the possibility to climb the power hierarchy (Jordan, Sivanathan, et al., 2011). It is possible that providing leaders with opportunities to expand their power, could also reduce power sharing – but for reasons other than
distrust. For example, leaders in such situations could fear that organizational decision-makers perceive power sharing as a sign of weakness, which could limit their upward mobility (Coleman, 2004). Rather than sharing power, leaders might be particularly motivated, then, to demonstrate that they can independently handle their responsibilities and task assignments.

Finally, future research could examine the long-term consequences of leaders’ reluctance towards power sharing. Although our theorizing and results suggest that leaders do not delegate authority and responsibilities because they want to protect their (fragile) power positions, it remains to be seen whether this is indeed a fruitful strategy. Many scholars have argued that leaders must involve lower-level employees in the decision-making process and harvest their talents and knowledge in order to remain effective and successful (e.g., Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Thus, even though a leader’s lack of power sharing is aimed at protecting his or her privileged power position, in the long haul, it might actually contribute to the leader’s downfall.

**Conclusion**

Research has shown the many positive individual and organizational benefits of power sharing. However, in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world in which many leaders currently find themselves, the instability of their power is likely to become increasingly salient. At the same time, there is evidence that future generations expect greater empowerment from their leaders in order to maintain job satisfaction and not demonstrate high turnover. The current research sheds light on not only *if* instability reduces power sharing but also *why* and *under what conditions*, with the hope that this knowledge can arm organizations with a greater ability to encourage this important leadership behavior and reduce leaders’ need to ‘cling to their power’.
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Appendix

Paranoia scenarios (adapted from Fenigstein, 1984)

On the following pages, eight hypothetical, everyday working situations are described. For each situation, two responses are depicted.

Please carefully read each situation, and imagine yourself being in such a situation. When you have a good sense of the situation, please indicate how likely you are to respond in the described ways on a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (extremely likely).

Please note that there are no right or wrong answers. Also, the two responses are not dependent on each other – meaning that you can think that both are likely, both are unlikely, or that one response is likely, while the other response is unlikely.

1. You are walking down the hallway at your office when one of your employees walks right by without saying “hello” to you. How likely is it that:
   (a) your subordinate was preoccupied and didn't notice you?
   (b) your subordinate wanted to avoid a conversation with you?*

2. You notice that your colleagues are having a meeting without you about one of the projects you’re involved in. How likely is it that:
   (a) your colleagues forgot to invite you to the meeting?
   (b) your colleagues actively decided to exclude you from the meeting?*
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3. You’ve sent an email to one of your employees a couple of days ago about an important issue that you are in charge delivering for a client. You need this person’s response to proceed and the deadline is quickly approaching. Your subordinate has not yet responded to your email. How likely is it that:
(a) your subordinate is busy and did not yet have time to respond to you?
(b) your subordinate is trying to sabotage your success?*

4. While you are working, your boss unexpectedly stops by and asks what you are working on. He seems quite interested and wants to know the details. How likely is it that:
(a) your boss was curious to see what you’re working on?
(b) your boss was there to see how productive you’re being?*

5. A meeting with your colleagues and boss has ended. When you have left the room, you hear your colleagues and boss laughing. How likely is it that:
(a) your colleagues and boss were mocking something you said?*
(b) your colleagues and boss were laughing at a joke one of them told?

6. Two of your colleagues are standing at the coffee machine. They notice you, and their conversation stops. How likely is it that:
(a) your colleagues were talking negatively about you?*
(b) your colleagues were talking about work, in general?

7. You are working one day when your boss asks you to come to his office straight away. How likely is it that:
(a) your boss is going to give you bad news about your performance?*
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(b) your boss wants to ask you something about one of your projects?

8. You are very busy and therefore one of your employees offers to help you with your work. How likely is it that:

(a) your subordinate has a hidden motive and wants something from you?*

(b) your subordinate wants to help you finish in time?

* is the paranoid response.