

Psychological Resistance to and Facilitation of Power-sharing in Organizations

Research Summary

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Statement of Problem

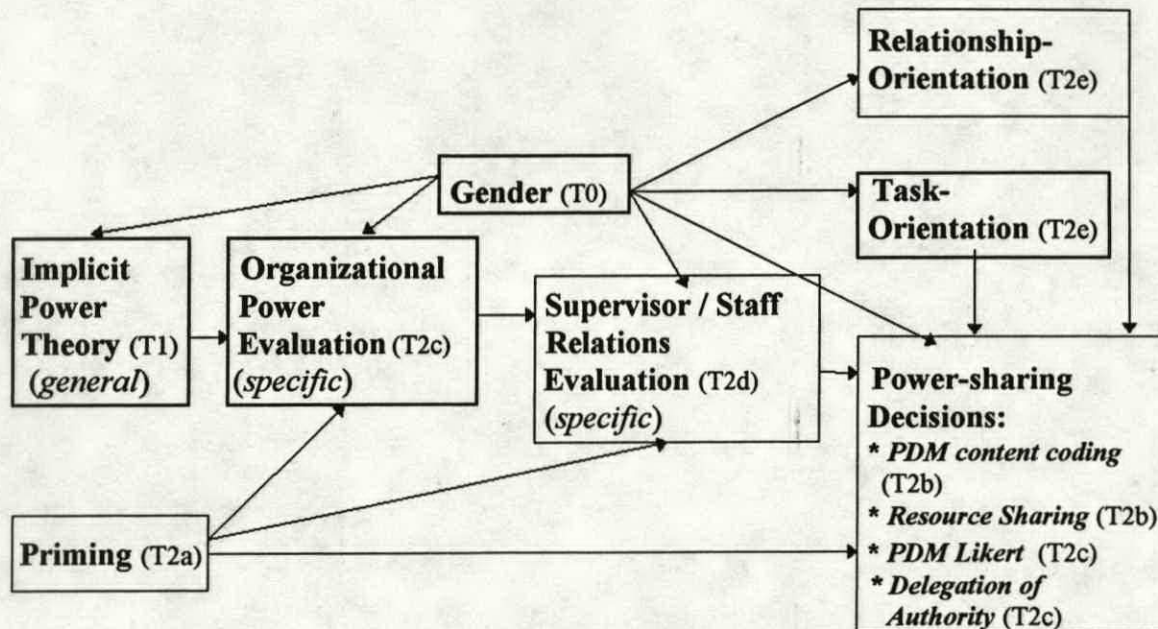
Beginning with the pioneering studies of participative leadership by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) and Coch and French (1948), social scientists have been interested in studying the consequences of *power-sharing* in organizations. Since that time the value and benefits of employee empowerment (participative decision making, delegation of authority, etc.) in organizations have been well documented (Vroom & Jago, 1988; Likert, 1967; Walls, 1990; Argyris, 1964; McGregor, 1960; Bradford & Cohen, 1984; Kanter, 1983; Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Peters & Austin, 1985; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Sashkin, 1984; Hollander & Offermann, 1990). However, it has been argued that a common obstacle to these processes of power-sharing in organizations is the willingness of those with power to share power (Jesaitis & Day, 1992; O'Toole, 1995). The powerful's resistance to power-sharing is a topic that has received very little attention by social scientists (Deutsch, 1973), particularly in organizations where the powerful have typically been able to shield themselves from study (Kipnis, 1976). In addition to this, as Ng (1980) noted in his text on *The Social Psychology of Power*, the field of social psychology has largely ignored the effects of the social context in much of its research on power relations.

Objectives of the Study

The study addressed the general question "*What are some critical individual difference factors which contribute to the psychological resistance of the powerful to the sharing of power in organizations and what role does the social context play in fostering this resistance?*" The study investigated the effects of individual's implicit theories of power, gender, and of contextual priming on individual's power-sharing decisions, organizational and staff-relations evaluations, and goal orientation concerning power-sharing events in an organizational context.

- The general approach was a cognitive, social information processing approach, which contends that under certain conditions individuals can be strongly influenced by the "cognitive baggage" (beliefs, stereotypes, etc.) they carry into a situation when attempting to make meaning out of social information in the situation.
- One such influence on information processing are the *implicit theories* or naïve models or assumptions that individual's make about the self and the social reality which guide the way they process and comprehend information about the self and other people. It was argued in this study that differences in individual's implicit theories of power in organizations could effect their power-sharing decisions, with more competitive and unequal theories of power leading to more competitive psychological orientations and less power-sharing.
- The study also argued that the contextual *priming* (the effects of one's prior context on his or her interpretation of new information) of different orientations for power-relations (competitive vs. neutral vs. cooperative) could trigger people's implicit theories of power in organizations, and have implications for how individuals with power in organizations encode, interpret and respond to incidents of power-sharing.
- Finally, *gender* differences on implicit theories of power, power-sharing decisions, and on the primary focus of concern (task-goals vs. relations with others) were proposed, with women having more cooperative and equal implicit theories, sharing more power, and being more relationship-oriented than men.

Figure 1: OVERALL MODEL



VARIABLES IN THE OVERALL MODEL

Gender: Demographic variable.

Implicit Power theory: (Measured at Time 1, 2-4 weeks prior to Time 2) A survey measure of differences in people's implicit theories of power in organizations (*perceptions of actual power relations* [Alpha = .83] and *ideals regarding power relations* [Alpha = .76]. See Appendix #1). This consisted of an automatic writing task requesting that subjects "Describe typical power relations in organizations", followed by 34 Likert items assessing perceptions and ideals about power in organizations.

Prime: (Manipulated at Time 2a at onset of laboratory study) Priming induction (subliminal priming of one of three types of priming: Competitive/Neutral/Cooperative).

Power-sharing Decisions (See Appendix #2):

- **Participative Decision-Making content coding** (Measured at Time 2b) An open-ended question which requested subjects to "respond" to the vignette by writing a brief paragraph. Content coded for spontaneous inclusion of subordinates in the decision-making process.
- **Resource Sharing** (Measured at Time 2b) Open-ended question content coded for spontaneous sharing of personal resources.
- **Participative Decision-Making Likert measure** (Measured at Time 2c) Likert item assessing level of participative decision-making (seven-point scale from autocratic to consensual decisions).
- **Delegation of Authority** (Measured at Time 2c) Likert item assessing level of delegation of authority (nine-point scale).

Organizational Power Evaluation: (Measured at Time 2c) 3 items assessed subjects evaluations of power relations in the simulated organization along the fixed-open, equal/unequal, and cooperative/competitive dimensions (nine-point Likert scales). [Alpha = .60] (See Appendix #2).

Supervisor / Staff Relations Evaluation: (Measured at Time 2d) A measure of supervisor / staff relation evaluations which requested the subjects to describe their relations with their staff in the vignette with a series of 20 descriptive trait scales (nine-point scales using bi-polar word-pairs as anchors) for cooperation/competition, power equality/inequality, and task-orientation vs. social-emotional orientation. [Alpha = .93]. Adapted from Wish, Deutsch & Kaplan (1976) (See Appendix #2).

Task / Relationship Goal Orientation: (Measured at Time 2e) Self-report items assessing relative goal orientation (to task-goals [Alpha = .55] vs. relationship goals [Alpha = .77]) for the subjects in response to the vignette (nine-point Likert scales). (See Appendix #2).

Methods

Study #1 was a survey study of MBA and TC graduate students (n=337) which attempted to measure differences in people's implicit theories of power in organizations along the previously outlined dimensions. This consisted of an automatic writing task requesting that subjects "Describe typical power relations in organizations", followed by 34 Likert items.

Study #2 was a laboratory study (n=98) This study used the "unrelated study" paradigm, where 98 of the subjects who had 2-4 weeks earlier completed the implicit power theory survey, were recruited for the lab study, however the association of the 2 studies was not discussed. The experimental design of the laboratory study was a 3 (Prime Type: Cooperative / Competitive / Neutral) x 2 (Gender: Male / Female), between-subjects design. Subjects were randomly assigned to prime type conditions, and matched on gender. The subjects were administered a priming induction (parafoveal subliminal priming) and then were presented with a managerial vignette, and after a distraction exercise, the power-sharing measures, the measures of organizational & staff-relations evaluations, and the task/social-emotional orientation measure.

Results

- Men had more competitive/fixed/unequal implicit theories (*ideals*) than women.
- More competitive/fixed/unequal implicit power theories predicted more C/F/U organizational power evaluations, supervisor/staff-relations evaluations, and less power-sharing.
- Competitive priming resulted in more C/F/U organizational power evaluations, supervisor/staff-relations evaluations, and less power-sharing.
- Women delegated more authority and were more concerned with their staff relations than men.
- No mediating effects of goal orientation found.
- No Implicit Power Theory x Prime interactions found.