

Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

draw on functional models of social hierarchy which argue for the benefits of power centralization in teams (Halevy, Chou, & Galinsky, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Tiedens, Unzueta, & Young, 2007; Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). Functional models of social hierarchy suggest that a clear hierarchy of authority, such as those that can stem from autocratic leadership, can meet fundamental human needs for hierarchical differentiation in social interaction (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Tiedens et al., 2007; Zitek & Tiedens, 2012), providing a psychologically reassuring environment (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Such a hierarchy clarifies roles and enhances interpersonal predictability and structure (Fromm, 1941; Halevy et al., 2011; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), facilitates coordination and cooperation (De Kwaadsteniet & Van Dijk, 2010; Halevy, Chou, Galinsky, & Murnighan, 2012; Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008), and can ultimately enhance team performance. Thus, autocratic leadership may under certain conditions have the potential to benefit rather than to hinder team climate and performance through creating a psychologically appealing hierarchical order within the team.

The current study aims to reconcile these divergent predictions on autocratic leadership by taking a contingency approach to autocratic leadership. Classic contingency approaches to leadership suggest that the effect of specific leader behaviors is entirely contingent upon the social-organizational context in which leadership takes place (e.g., Fiedler, 1964; Van Kleef, Homan, Beersma, & Van Knippenberg, 2010). Specifically, contingency approaches suggest that contextual factors, such as characteristics of the team and the environment, may enhance or decrease the effectiveness of specific leader behaviors. When considering the power-centralizing tendencies of autocratic leadership, a particularly relevant aspect of the team context that may determine the effectiveness of autocratic leadership is the presence of intrateam power struggles, or competition within the team (including between members and between members and the leader) over positions of power and control (Greer & Van Kleef, 2010; Pfeffer, 1981). When members accept the power structure within the team (team power struggles are low), the benefits of hierarchical differentiation (such as high order and role clarity) brought about by autocratic leader behaviors may facilitate a smooth-running, clear, and predictable interpersonal team environment, which is positive for team climate, and thereby for team performance (Halevy et al., 2011; Kahn, 1990; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Tiedens et al., 2007; Van Vugt et al., 2008). In contrast, when the power structure within the team is challenged, the centralizing power behaviors of autocratic leaders will clash with the competition for power of the team members and may activate team member's feelings of resentment and strain morale (Adams, 1965; Anderson & Brown, 2010). In such situations, autocratic leadership is less likely to create a psychologically safe environment and may harm team performance.

In explaining the quality of team climate that may be brought about by the interplay between leadership style and team power dynamics, we focus on team psychological safety as a key construct. Team psychological safety is defined as a team climate characterized by respect and trust among team members, in which members feel that situations are secure, predictable and clear (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990, p. 705). In a psychologically safe climate, team members feel accepted, value each other's contributions, and trust that others will not attempt to gain personal advantage at their expense. Team psychological safety tends to be positively associated with team performance (e.g., Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011).

Using a sample of 60 retail outlet teams, we examine the joint effects of the autocratic leadership of the retail outlet manager and power struggles within the retail outlet team on the financial performance of the team, and focus on team psychological safety as a mediator (see Fig. 1), while controlling for the role of leader consideration. In addition, we exploratively compare and contrast considerate and autocratic leader behaviors under these conditions. The present research (a) extends the leadership literature by identifying team power struggles as a theoretically relevant boundary condition for the effects of autocratic leadership and the improvement or inhibition of psychological safety as an underlying process of autocratic leadership, (b) contributes to the power literature by examining the role of team power struggles in relation to the team environment and by providing a first examination of how team power struggles may alter the effectiveness of certain styles of team leadership, and (c) suggests several potential practical implications for managers in terms of highlighting when drawbacks and benefits of autocratic leader behaviors for team morale and performance may occur even when the role of leader consideration is taken into account.

Theoretical background

The concept of autocratic leadership stems from early experimental studies by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) and Lippitt (1940). While modern operationalizations of autocratic leadership differ somewhat from study to study (Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas, 2000; Gastil, 1994), autocratic leadership is usually characterized by behaviors focused on centralizing decision-making and concentrating power (Foels et al., 2000; Jago, 1982) through which the leader controls every aspect of subordinates' activity without consideration

characteristics such as degree of structure and role ambiguity have been proposed and found to influence the favorability of the situation for task-oriented leader behavior. Given the focus of autocratic leadership on the centralization of power in teams, we argue that a key factor in determining the effects of autocratic leadership on team psychological safety and performance is the degree to which team members challenge the power structure in their team.

When power struggles exist within a team, team members challenge their and others' positions in the team hierarchy (Greer & Van Kleef, 2010), which is created and maintained by the autocratic leader. Team members may show a wide variety of behaviors when engaging in struggles, such as trying to promote or protect their relative positions vis-à-vis one another through strategies such as impression management (e.g., Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), gossip and sabotage (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), and other similar forms of political behavior (e.g., Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarther, & Ammeter, 2002). In contrast, if power struggles are low, team members readily accept their positions in the team hierarchy (Greer & Van Kleef, 2010). Under such conditions, the hierarchical positions in the team are not challenged and team power dynamics are minimal.

When teams have high levels of power struggles, and autocratic leadership is high, the focus of autocratic leaders on the centralization of power and the creation of hierarchy may backfire. When power struggles run rampant in the team, team members do not accept the hierarchy and there is little consensus concerning each member's position in the hierarchy. Consequently, team members will not have uniform expectations about rank appropriate behaviors and roles (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 1986) and social interactions will be complex (Tiedens et al., 2007), limiting the effectiveness of an autocratic leader's tendency towards power centralization. The power literature suggests that in teams high on power struggles, team members' attention will be narrowed to issues of defense, control, and protection and/or promotion of one's own power (Bugental & Lewis, 1999; Greer & Van Kleef, 2010). Team members are then more likely to perceive controlling aspects of their environment, such as a controlling autocratic leader and a rigidly imposed hierarchy, as threatening (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), rather than as safe and clear.

In these conditions, the centralizing power behaviors of autocratic leaders are likely to clash with the competition for power of the team members and are likely to be perceived as provocative and oppressive, making members feel restricted in their struggle for power (Bugental & Lewis, 1999). Both the power literature and equity theory (Adams, 1965; Anderson & Brown, 2010) suggest that this may activate team members' feelings of being undervalued and wronged and create a defensive and unsafe team climate (Edmondson, 2003). Team members will feel at risk about what they say and how they act (Edmondson, 2004; Kahn, 2007; Schein, 1999) when autocratic leadership is shown in teams characterized by high levels of power struggles.

In contrast, when power struggles are low, high levels of autocratic leadership behaviors may have the potential to benefit team climate and performance. As explained above, autocratic leadership, when its accompanying power differentiation is accepted and not challenged, may create a structured, ordered, psychologically appealing hierarchical environment (Halevy et al., 2011; Ronay et al., 2012; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003; Tiedens et al., 2007). Such a hierarchy can improve clarity within the team (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Keltner et al., 2008; Mischel, 1977), providing members a means to know what to expect from other team members, what one's own contribution should be, and who to go to for what. This can provide a safe and predictable environment in which members are able to take risks and speak up towards each other. Indeed, clarity has been posited to be a key component of psychological safety in teams (Brown & Leigh, 1996; Kahn, 1990), as it provides members a way to form trusting relationships and engage in positive, expectation-congruent interactions. Therefore, when power struggles are low, autocratic leadership may benefit team performance through creating a psychologically safe team climate.

When autocratic leadership is low, leaders will have less of a tendency to control and centralize power in the group (Foels et al., 2000; Jago, 1982), and as such power struggles are less likely to matter for the usage of leadership. Whether leaders adapt a transformational or empowering approach or simply are laissez-faire in their style, leaders who are low in autocratic tendencies do not interest themselves as much in the hierarchical structuring and centralized command of the group. Under such leaders, the team hierarchy is less tied to the leader. When leaders do not engage in autocratic behavior, power struggles are thus less likely to alter the effects of leadership on psychological safety and performance.

Summarizing, when high levels of power struggles exist in the team, autocratic leadership and the centralization of power may frustrate and constrain team members competing for power, impairing team psychological safety. In contrast, in a context with low power struggles, autocratic leadership and its resulting hierarchical differentiation can facilitate a smooth-running, clear, predictable team environment, and enhance team psychological safety. When autocratic leadership is low, power struggles are less likely to affect the relationship between leadership and team psychological safety. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1. Power struggles moderate the effects of autocratic leadership on team psychological safety, such that autocratic leadership is positively related to team psychological safety when power struggles are low and negatively related to team psychological safety when power struggles are high.

Team psychological safety and team performance

Team psychological safety has important implications for team performance (Edmondson, 1999, 2003). Team psychological safety is a fundamental characteristic of the work environment, which affects team members' feelings of security and thus their capability to learn and their work engagement (Edmondson, 2004). In clear, consistent, interpersonally predictable, and non-threatening situations, team members feel safe and are more likely to invest themselves at work and to make themselves vulnerable to other team members in what they say and how they act (Edmondson, 2004; Kahn, 2007; Schein, 1999). This helps them to be open to engage

in performance-enhancing behaviors such as effortful, interpersonally risky, learning behavior (Edmondson, 2003) as well as collaboration (Edmondson, 1999).

In contrast, in teams lacking psychological safety, situations are unclear, inconsistent, unpredictable, or threatening (Kahn, 1990). As a result, team members avoid engaging in interpersonal behaviors for which outcomes are uncertain and potentially harmful for their image. Thus, without safety, team members do not seek help, admit errors, or bring up tough issues, and are less personally engaging, and, in turn, their performance will suffer (Edmondson, 1999, 2003). Team psychological safety has been consistently positively linked to learning in teams, engagement in quality improvement efforts, successful adaptation to change and perceived team performance (Burke, Stagl, Salas, Pierce, & Kendall, 2006; Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001; Emery, Summers, & Surak, 1996; Faraj & Yan, 2009; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). Baer and Frese (2003) broadened this construct to organizational climate for psychological safety and found a positive relationship with firm performance. In line with this, we expect that team psychological safety is positively related with objective financial performance in teams. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2. Psychological safety is positively related to team performance.

The mediating role of psychological safety

We propose that the interaction between autocratic leadership and team power struggles affects team psychological safety, which in turn affects team performance. When team members contest their roles and engage in political battles to challenge the power balance and hierarchy in the team (high power struggles), autocratic leadership is less likely to establish a clear hierarchy and will clash with such power struggles by strictly enforcing control in a situation when members are rebelling against control. Such controlling, compliance focused actions of the autocratic leader will likely be perceived as provocative and create antipathy and defensiveness (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner et al., 2003), thereby lowering psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999, 2003). Without team psychological safety, team members are less likely to invest themselves at work and their performance will suffer (Edmondson, 1999).

In contrast, when power struggles are low and the hierarchy created and maintained by the autocratic leaders is willingly accepted by team members, the order and clear (power) role division in the unchallenged chain of command are psychologically rewarding, and enhance team psychological safety (Halevy et al., 2011; Ronay et al., 2012). In psychologically safe teams, team members understand and value each other's roles and contributions. Having a clear command structure and hierarchy may help clarify these roles and contributions (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Keltner et al., 2008; Mischel, 1977), making it easier for team members to place trust in each other. Teammates have less concern for negative interpersonal consequences as they experience a sense of security in knowing what everyone contributes and understanding what is and is not their responsibility. Team members then tend to be more psychologically engaged and are more likely to engage in performance enhancing behavior such as learning and collaboration (Edmondson, 1996; Edmondson et al., 2001).

Finally, when autocratic leadership is low, leaders are less likely to impose a fixed hierarchy on the team, which leaves more room for adaptation. Team power struggles are less likely to clash with controlling leader behaviors and thus may have less relevance for leader–team interactions. Thus, as reflected in our overall theoretical model illustrated in Fig. 1, we propose that the interaction between autocratic leadership with power struggles indirectly relates to team performance through its relation with psychological safety. Researchers refer to models of this configuration as indirect moderated mediation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007), as formalized in Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 3. Autocratic leadership is related to team performance via conditional indirect effects, such that the interaction between autocratic leadership and team power struggles is related to team psychological safety, which in turn is related to team performance.

The role of considerate leader behaviors

Edmondson (1999) shows that a supportive team leader has an important influence on team psychological safety and ultimately on team performance. To clarify and contrast the role of autocratic leader behavior with more supportive leader behavior, we also include a leadership style in our study that traditionally is seen as positive for team morale, namely leader consideration (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). Considerate leader behaviors are oriented towards maintaining good interpersonal relations and show concern for followers and express support (Bass, 1990) and thus considerate behaviors are likely to positively relate to team psychological safety. Considerate leaders can be both low and high on autocratic leader behavior (see paternalistic leadership for a form of leadership combining high levels of both, e.g., Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008) and including this leadership style in our analysis allows us to test whether we find the expected indirect moderated mediation effect for autocratic leadership when we control for consideration. In addition, we explore how autocratic leader behaviors compare to or contrast with considerate ones under low and high power struggles.

Methods

Sample and procedure

We conducted a field study among the retail outlet teams of a multinational services corporation in the Netherlands. Each retail outlet employed three to ten employees, who were responsible for providing advice and financial services to customers (e.g., safe

custody of money, transmission of money between accounts, provision of loans, foreign exchange, provision and marketing of financial services such as insurance, mortgages). The teams worked together closely, had a common goal, and identified themselves as a team, so each retail outlet was treated as a unique team (Hackman, 1987).

Team members at the different retail outlets filled in an online survey, which assessed the leadership behavior of their manager, power struggles and psychological safety in their team. Their managers filled in a survey containing questions about personal and team demographic characteristics. The surveys were hosted via the first author's university website and followed the company's annual engagement survey. In addition to this survey data, we had access to the financial performance data (sales/visitors) of the retail outlets from the four weeks before the surveys (what we call Time 1) and the four weeks after the surveys (what we call Time 3). The surveys were online for four weeks (what we call Time 2) between these two periods.

The survey was sent to the 991 team members of 226 retail outlets and their managers. After excluding incomplete team and manager surveys, as well as surveys from teams of two or less members, we had a usable response from 60 teams, representing 225 team members and their 60 managers. The overall response rates of group members and managers were 23.70 and 26.55%, respectively. To check for selective non-response, we were given permission to use the data from the company engagement survey that preceded our survey. This enabled us to compare the set of teams that participated in our study with the teams that participated in the company engagement survey (a total of 200 retail outlets). We found no significant differences with regard to mean age level, mean educational level, job clarity, work pressure, team satisfaction, team commitment, organizational satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The average team size was 3.75. Forty percent of the team members were male and 38% had received education beyond high school. Team members' mean organizational tenure was 11.7 years. Because the company went through a merger in the past year, the length of the manager–subordinate relationship was around a year on average ($SD = .75$, range 3 months–7 years). Sixty percent of the managers were male and 72% had received education beyond high school. The mean organizational tenure of the supervisors was 9.6 years.

Measures

All perceptual measures had a 7-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and were rated by team members. Team performance scores were obtained from archival company records.

Autocratic leadership

Autocratic leadership was measured using the 5-item validated and reliable scale of De Hoogh, Den Hartog, and Koopman (2004) (see also De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009). Examples of items are: “Is bossy and orders team members around” and “Believes that, in reality, only one person can be the leader.” The coefficient alpha was .75.

Power struggles

We measured power struggles using the three item scale developed by Greer and Van Kleef (2010), which is the only available scale to directly measure the dynamics of power struggles in the team setting. Example items are: “Team members compete for control in this team” and “The hierarchy in this team is in conflict.” The coefficient alpha was .87.

Psychological safety

Team members' perception of psychological safety was measured using a four item short form of Edmondson's (1999) scale. The shortened version of the scale was used as a result of time constraints imposed on us in administering the survey, which followed the company's annual engagement survey. Shortened four item versions of this scale have been used in other studies (e.g., Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Example items are: “People on this team sometimes reject others for being different (reverse coded)” and “It is safe to take a risk on this team.” The coefficient alpha of this short version scale was .84.

Team performance

We measured team performance based on the monetary value of sales per day divided by the number of customers per retail outlet per day. Sales is a commonly used performance measure in research (Banker, Lee, Potter, & Srinivasan, 1996; Weitz, 1981) and is also widely used in practice (Peck, 1982). Increased customer service leads to increased customer satisfaction, which leads to an increase in sales. Sales is also central to making profit (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994; Hauser, Simester, & Wernerfelt, 1994). The employed measure was also used to assess team performance by the management of the firm that the study was conducted in. Pre-survey performance was operationalized by taking the average performance of the retail outlet for the month before the survey, and post-survey performance was measured by taking the average of the performance for the month after the survey.

Control variables

Leader consideration

Considerate leader behaviors are likely to be positive for team psychological safety and team performance (Edmondson, 1999). Therefore we controlled for leader consideration in the analysis and exploratively compare the role of considerate and autocratic behaviors. Leader consideration was measured using 6 items from the LBDQ-XII (Stogdill, 1963). The coefficient alpha was .92.

Additional control variables

As the teams varied in size and larger spans of control can diminish a leader's ability to influence followers, we included team size as a control variable (Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005). Tenure diversity (measured using coefficient of variation; Harrison & Klein, 2007), leader tenure and subordinate tenure with the leader were included as well, because these variables might affect the level of familiarity and interaction among team members. Because the company in which we conducted this study went through a merger in the past year, we controlled for whether teams contained only employees from the original company (coded by a 0) or employees from both the original company and merged one (coded by a 1). Lastly, in common with other research using financial data as outcome we controlled for prior team financial performance, as it is likely to influence subsequent team performance and people may attribute performance to the qualities of leaders (see e.g., Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Van Knippenberg, Dawson, West, & Homan, 2011; Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001).¹

Measurement model

To verify whether the autocratic leadership, power struggles, psychological safety and leader consideration measures captured distinct constructs, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on all the items of the four scales. In addition to the Chi-square statistic, we investigated the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; acceptable fit: .05–.08, good fit: 0–.05), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; acceptable fit: .05–.10, good fit: 0–.05) and the comparative fit index (CFI; acceptable fit: .95–.97, good fit: .97–1) (see Chen, Curran, Bollen, Kirby, & Paxton, 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004; Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003).

We found a four-factor solution, corresponding to the four scales, χ^2 four-factor model (129, $N = 225$) = 351.85, $p < .01$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .088, SRMR = .097, to have a better fit than a three (autocratic combined with leader consideration items), two- or single-factor solution. Furthermore, although the RMSEA value of the four-factor solution of .088 is a little higher than .08, given that the index is dependent on the sample size and the other goodness-of-fit measures are within acceptable ranges, we followed recommendations not to rely only on one fit measure and considered the fit of the measurement model as acceptable (Barrett, 2007; Chen et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh et al., 2004).

Data aggregation

To assess the appropriateness of aggregating individual scores to the team level, we calculated within-team agreement (r_{wg} ; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984), intraclass correlations (ICC[1]), and reliabilities of the means (ICC[2]; Bliese, 2000). These tests yielded sufficient support to aggregate our data to the team level of analysis (autocratic leadership: ICC[1] = .14, ICC[2] = .38, r_{wg} = .74; power struggles: ICC[1] = .10, ICC[2] = .30, r_{wg} = .70; psychological safety: ICC[1] = .22, ICC[2] = .52, r_{wg} = .83, Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1. All variables were mean centered prior to analyses (Aiken & West, 1991).

To test our hypotheses, we follow the procedure outlined by Preacher et al. (2007) for examining a set of relationships (as proposed in Hypotheses 1 and 2), which they label a moderated mediation model (as formalized in Hypothesis 3). Specifically, we use the MODMED macro (Model 7, Preacher & Hayes, 2004), which provides results relevant for our hypotheses in three steps.²

To test Hypothesis 1, the first step of the MODMED analysis examines the effect of the interaction between autocratic leadership and power struggles on psychological safety after controlling for the main effects of autocratic leadership, leader consideration and power struggles, and control variables (including team performance at time 1). Results are presented in the higher part of Table 2 and reveal a significant interaction between autocratic leadership and power struggles ($B = -.40$, $p = .002$) that accounts for 10% of the variance in psychological safety.

We assessed the nature of this significant interaction by plotting values representing plus and minus 1 standard deviation from the means for autocratic leadership and team performance (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). As shown in Fig. 2 and supported by a directional simple slope test (Aiken & West, 1991), autocratic leadership is positively related to psychological safety when power struggles are low (1 SD below the mean, $B = .26$, $p = .008$) and negatively related to psychological safety when power struggles are high (1 SD above

¹ When removing these control variables from the analyses the pattern of results remains the same.

² Testing conditional indirect effects using hierarchical regression analysis following procedures recommended by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005) yielded similar results.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Team size	3.75	1.32										
2. Manager tenure	9.62	8.88	.04									
3. Tenure diversity	.96	.42	-.02	.13								
4. Tenure with the manager	0.88	0.93	-.04	-.10	-.27*							
5. Merged team or not	.27	.22	.21	.08	.35**	-.18						
6. Leader consideration	4.56	.64	-.13	-.06	.00	-.03	.03					
7. Autocratic leadership	3.87	0.72	-.01	.07	-.15	.07	-.03	-.22				
8. Power struggles	2.03	0.66	.06	.08	.15	.26*	.10	-.41**	.11			
9. Psychological safety	5.69	0.63	-.08	-.02	.07	-.12	-.16	.41**	-.05	-.58**		
10. Team performance time 1	7.59	4.27	-.22	-.07	.15	.13	-.04	-.02	.04	.21	-.06	
11. Team performance time 3	7.82	3.12	-.15	-.05	-.03	-.08	-.16	.04	.16	-.01	.29*	.42**

Note. *N* = 60 teams. All variables other than performance were measured at Time 2. Tenure is in years. Teams coded as 0 contain only employees from the original company; teams coded as 1 contain employees from both the original company and the company it merged with.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

the mean, *B* = -.26, *p* = .031), supporting Hypothesis 1. Teams with leaders high on autocratic leader behaviors score significantly higher on team psychological safety under low team power struggles than under high team power struggles. Under low-autocratic leadership, we find no significant difference between high and low team power struggles in relation to team psychological safety.

To test Hypothesis 2, the second step of the MODMED procedure (lower part of Table 2) examines the impact of psychological safety on team performance, while controlling for autocratic leadership, leader consideration, team performance at time 1 and control variables. Supporting Hypothesis 2, psychological safety is positively related to team performance (*B* = 1.59, *p* = .017).

To test the moderated mediation model as formalized in Hypothesis 3, the third step of the MODMED procedure examines the significance of the conditional indirect effect of autocratic leadership on team performance through psychological safety as a function of power struggles. Moderated mediation is demonstrated when the conditional indirect effect of autocratic leadership on team performance, via team psychological safety differs in strength across low and high levels of team power struggles. We found support for moderated mediation as the index of moderated mediation is negative (Hayes, in press), meaning that the indirect relationship between autocratic leadership and team performance through team psychological safety is a function of team power struggles (index = -.70; bias and accelerated 90% CI: -1.91, -.11). Specifically, there is a positive effect of autocratic leadership on team performance via team psychological safety when team power struggles are low (*b* = .42; bias and accelerated 90% CI: .02, .1.13), and a negative effect of autocratic leadership on team performance via team psychological safety when team power struggles are high (*b* = -.42; bias and accelerated 90% CI: -1.72, -.07, see Table 3).

Table 2

Estimated coefficients of the moderated mediation model.

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²
<i>Psychological safety</i>				
Constant	.02	.06		
Team size	.01	.05		
Manager tenure	.01	.01		
Tenure diversity	.52**	.18		
Tenure with the manager	.07	.08		
Merged team or not	-.56	.31		
Leader consideration	.19	.12		
Team performance time 1	.00	.02		
Autocratic leadership	.00	.09		
Power struggles	-.55**	.11		
Autocratic leadership × power struggles	-.40**	.13	5.54**	.53
<i>Team performance time 3</i>				
Constant	.00	.36		
Team size	-.04	.29		
Manager tenure	-.01	.04		
Tenure diversity	-.91	.98		
Tenure with the manager	-.56	.41		
Merged team or not	-.95	1.86		
Leader consideration	-.33	.71		
Team performance time 1	.34**	.09		
Autocratic leadership	.57	.52		
Psychological safety	1.59*	.65	2.88**	.34

Note. *N* = 60 teams.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

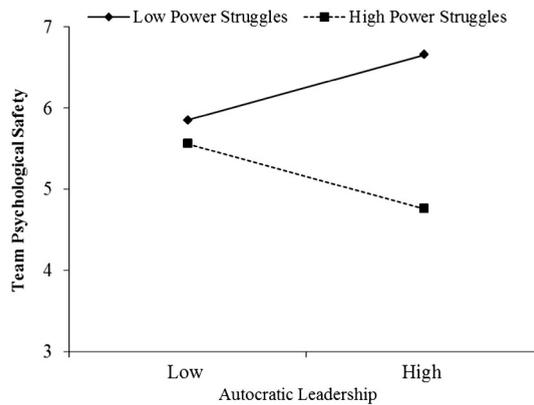


Fig. 2. Effects of autocratic leadership and team power struggles on team psychological safety.

Thus, as predicted, the indirect effects of autocratic leadership on team performance through team psychological safety are significant but in opposite directions for high and low team power struggles. When team power struggles are low, autocratic leadership is positively related to team psychological safety, and team psychological safety in turn is positively associated with team performance. However, when team power struggles are high, autocratic leadership is indirectly negatively related to team performance, through its negative relationship with psychological safety.

Exploratory results

In addition to the tests of the hypotheses (in which, as noted, we control for leader consideration) and in light of the fact that considerate leader behavior should be beneficial for team psychological safety, two additional analyses were conducted to more explicitly compare and contrast autocratic and considerate leader behaviors when considering contexts characterized by more or less intrateam power struggles.³ The first analysis involved assessing team power struggles as a moderating variable of the indirect effect of leader consideration on team performance through psychological safety using the MODMED macro (Model 7, Preacher & Hayes, 2004). We entered the previously used control variables and the two-way interactions of team power struggles by leader consideration and team power struggles by autocratic leadership in the model. Our additional analysis showed that the team power struggles by leader consideration interaction was not significant ($B = 0.23, p = .230$). Including this possible confounding interaction effect in the model did not alter our findings. In line with Hypothesis 1, team power struggles remained a moderator of the relationship between autocratic leadership and team psychological safety ($B = -0.32, p = .025$). In line with Hypothesis 2, psychological safety continued to be positively related to team performance ($B = 1.34, p = .058$). Furthermore, the index of moderated mediation remained negative while controlling for the non-significant interaction of leader consideration and team power struggles (index = -0.43 ; bias and accelerated 90% CI: $-1.55, -0.0002$). Thus, in line with Hypothesis 3, we found power struggles to moderate the indirect effect of autocratic leadership on team performance through team psychological safety. This was not the case for leader consideration.

The second additional analysis involved a three-way interaction analysis (autocratic leadership \times considerate leadership \times power struggles) for explaining team psychological safety using the process interaction macro (Model 3, Preacher & Hayes, 2004). We entered the previously used control variables, the main effects, the two-way interactions and the three-way interaction autocratic leadership, leader consideration and power struggles in the model. The overall model is significant ($R^2 = .56$). We again found the expected significant interaction between autocratic leadership and power struggles for explaining team psychological safety ($B = -0.38, p = .053$). We did not find a significant three-way interaction, nor a significant interaction between leader consideration and power struggles. However, to further explore whether autocratic leadership potentially has a more positive relationship with psychological safety than leader consideration under low levels of team power struggles, we conducted a non-directional simple slope test (Aiken & West, 1991). In teams with low levels of power struggles, autocratic leadership is more positively related to psychological safety (1 SD below the mean, $B = 0.26, p = .031$) than considerate leadership (1 SD below the mean, $B = -0.028, p = .884$). This supports our notion that autocratic leadership can be particularly useful for teams with low power struggles, and there are conditions under which autocratic leadership even exerts positive effects above and beyond those of considerate leadership. When team power struggles were high, however, autocratic leadership was more negative for psychological safety, although this was not significant (1 SD above the mean, $B = -0.25, p = .125$) whereas considerate leadership was positively related to team psychological safety (1 SD above the mean, $B = 0.44, p = .030$). While tentative given that the three-way interaction term is not significant, this supports our idea that autocratic leadership is particularly negative for teams with high power struggles and our additional analysis suggests that in those circumstances considerate leadership may have a more positive relationship with psychological safety than autocratic leadership.

³ We like to thank two anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

Table 3Bootstrapping results for test of conditional indirect effects at specific values of the moderator (team power struggles): Mean and ± 1 standard deviation.

Mediator	Value of team power struggles	Conditional indirect effect	SE	90% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Psychological safety	– 1 SD (1.37)	.42*	.30	.02	1.13
	M (2.03)	.00	.18	–.36	.26
	+ 1 SD (2.69)	–.42*	.38	–1.72	–.07

Note. Results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples. Conditional indirect effects are on-tailed. CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

We proposed that autocratic leadership can be both positive and negative for team psychological safety and performance. Our study confirms this idea and suggests that the nature of this effect depends on the presence of power struggles in the team. In teams where the hierarchy is willingly accepted by team members (i.e., power struggles are low), autocratic leadership was positively related to team psychological safety and was also indirectly related to an increase in team performance, whereas in teams in which the division of power was challenged and rebelled against by team members (i.e., power struggles are high), autocratic leadership was negatively related to team psychological safety and also indirectly related to a drop in performance. These effects were found even when controlling for considerate leader behaviors.

In this research, we aimed to bridge classic work on the contingencies of effective leadership (e.g., Fiedler, 1964) with contemporary research on the social functions of hierarchy and we aimed to contribute to the literatures on leadership, power, and teams in a number of ways. First, our paper extends the leadership literature by providing a richer understanding of autocratic leadership. Although previous findings on the effect of autocratic leadership have been mixed (see Bass & Bass, 2008; Foels et al., 2000; Miller & Monge, 1986), researchers to date have mostly emphasized the negative effects of autocratic leadership on team morale and performance (e.g., De Cremer, 2006; De Luque et al., 2008; Edmondson, 2003; Van Vugt et al., 2004). Work that did study beneficial effects of autocratic leadership, typically focused on when it is more or less allowed to use autocratic leadership to heighten productivity and quality of decision-making, and has overlooked potential positive effects on team climate and morale (e.g., Bass & Bass, 2008; Blake & Mouton, 1964; Vroom & Jago, 1988; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). The results of this study suggest that under certain conditions there can be functional value of autocratic leadership for order and security as we found a positive relationship between autocratic leadership and team psychological safety and subsequent team performance, although this only occurred when team power struggles were low. Results showed that these findings are irrespective of the role of considerate leader behaviors in these circumstances.

Our study also provides further insights in theories of social hierarchy (e.g., Adams, 1965; Anderson & Brown, 2010; Halevy et al., 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Tiedens et al., 2007; Van Vugt et al., 2008), by showing that competition over hierarchical positions within the team may affect whether autocratic leadership, and its corresponding centralization of power in the team, benefit or harm team psychological safety and, indirectly, performance. The results suggest that autocratic leadership is only effective in establishing a clear chain of command which helps members make sense of the world, allocate resources, and interact in a safe and efficient manner (cf. Halevy et al., 2011; Ronay et al., 2012) when team members accept the existing power hierarchy in the team and do not engage in power struggles. However, as power struggles can always (even unexpectedly) erupt, over time relying solely on autocratic leader behavior, may not be sufficient to safeguard having functional social hierarchies in teams. We return to this below.

The results suggest that when power struggles exist in the team, the hierarchy set up by the leader is challenged, and in this context autocratic leadership may clash and be harmful for psychological safety and team performance. Team members are sensitive about power inequity issues (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Greer & Van Kleef, 2010; Keltner et al., 2003) and in such high power struggles teams, the continued centralization of power in the team by the autocratic leader likely feeds into a negative and unsafe team climate (Edmondson, 2003). By showing the role of power dynamics and demonstrating that team psychological safety mediates the indirect interactive effect of autocratic leadership and power struggles on team performance, we contribute to understanding the potential mechanisms through which autocratic leadership can affect team functioning even beyond the role of leader consideration. In addition, our findings support previous evidence for the positive influence of team psychological safety on team performance (e.g., Schaubroeck et al., 2011).

Second, and relatedly, our study contributes to the growing literature on the dynamics of power and leadership in teams (Anderson & Brown, 2010; Halevy et al., 2011; Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Sauer, 2011). There is only limited work on the behaviors that occur surrounding the quest to gain or maintain power in teams (Collinson, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Van Vugt et al., 2008). A growing line of research suggests that individuals in teams may at times strategically compete to improve or protect their power positions and challenge those of others (e.g., Bendersky & Hayes, 2012; Owens & Sutton, 2001; Porath, Overbeck, & Pearson, 2008). Our study operationalizes this as power struggles and starts to provide some initial insight into how power struggles within teams may determine the effectiveness of the team leader behavior. When power struggles exist in the team, the hierarchy set by the leader is likely to be defied and team members' attention is narrowed to restraining aspects of the environment (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Greer & Van Kleef, 2010; Keltner et al., 2003). The results of our study suggest that this may alter the effectiveness of autocratic leadership for team morale and subsequent performance. Thus, our study suggests the importance of power dynamics and in doing so offers an extension to research on power and leadership and helps to further draw together the large and often disparate literatures on team power dynamics and leadership.

behavior of the partner (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003; Tiedens & Jimenez, 2003). Generally, this would suggest a negative relationship between autocratic leadership and team power struggles. Yet, there may be specific circumstances in which autocratic leaders enhance or decrease team power struggles. Team personality composition may, for example, play a role in whether or not power struggles are likely to occur. Research has shown that when followers favor discipline they are more satisfied and perform better under autocratic leaders (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Sanford, 1950; Tosi, 1973). The degree team members expect social interactions to be organized in a hierarchical way (Mast, 2005) may also affect the occurrence of team power struggles in reactance to autocratic leadership. Further, autocratic leaders who are perceived as illegitimate, unfair or incompetent may have a higher chance of having the hierarchy they created within the team being challenged. Investigating these situations and identifying when and why autocratic leadership and power struggles go together could provide important insight into the effects of power struggles on leadership.

In general, exploring which individuals or subgroups within a team initiate power struggles as well as who responds and why would be an interesting avenue for future research. Power is an inherent and perhaps axiomatic characteristic of social interaction and power struggles in some form are always going on in organizations. In teams, even if not currently present, they could easily be sparked to full throttle by various factors, including changes in the task, membership or environment or the behavior by the leader or that of fellow team members (Bendersky & Hayes, 2012). This also implies that although autocratic leadership can, under certain conditions, be positive for team psychological safety as results show in our study, it should be treated with caution. Autocratic leadership can be risky if power struggles erupt. And given the inevitability of power struggles in organizations, it is entirely possible that any benefits of autocratic leadership may be only temporary, and as such, as a conscious strategy, such leadership should only be employed when absolutely necessary. An example may be a situation of crisis in which centralization of command may be needed. Further research is needed in identifying exactly when autocratic leadership can best be used, and what other conditions need to be in place to support the effective usage of autocratic leadership behaviors in teams.

Researchers could also profitably direct their attention to disentangling specific power struggle behaviors as potential moderators of autocratic leadership effects. Much may be gained by adopting a more refined view and investigate how different behavioral facets of team power struggles (e.g., competition, withholding information, intimidation) affect leadership outcomes. Differentiating between power struggles among team members and power struggles with the leader could also assist in clarifying effects of leader behavior. Bonding together and engaging in power struggles against the leader may have different effects from accepting the power position of the leader and fighting among each other to emerge as the leader's favorite. Leaders with different power bases (e.g., position versus personal power) may also be differently affected by intrateam power struggles. It would also be valuable to more clearly pin down the moderating process of power struggles on the relationship between autocratic leadership and team psychological safety. Future research could, for example, include team members' perceptions of structure and oppression as mediators of the moderating effect of team power struggles on the relationship between autocratic leadership and team psychological safety.

It is also important to recognize limits to the generalizability of our results. We studied a sample of retail outlet teams of a multinational services corporation. The team members had jobs characterized by standardized procedures, which may have been conducive to autocratic leadership. The finding in our study that in teams with low power struggles autocratic leader behaviors were more strongly related to positive team outcomes than non-autocratic or considerate leader behaviors seems consistent with this idea. In jobs with less standardization and jobs where creativity and innovation are critical to performance, autocratic leadership may generally have less positive effects (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). In such settings, non-autocratic empowering forms of leadership may be more effective. However, it also could be that in our sample non-autocratic leaders represented a significant number of laissez faire leaders (although we have no indication of this, we cannot fully rule this out), which may have made it more likely to find positive effects of autocratic leadership in our study. To provide evidence of generalizability and find out more about additional contingencies of this type of leadership, future research is needed to replicate our findings within other organizations and occupational settings.

More generally, our conclusions are of course bound by the (national, ethnic, company) cultural context within which we have undertaken our research (cf. the iron cage of cultural complexity; Parry & Faris, 2011). The model was tested in a Dutch organization. The Netherlands, in most respects, fits the Western European cultural profile well (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). This suggests that our findings will likely generalize beyond the Netherlands. However, cultural power distance is low in the Netherlands compared to many other regions in the world (Hofstede, 2001). Given that, generally, autocratic leadership is viewed as more negatively in low power distance cultures (Dickson et al., 2003), our study may provide a conservative setting within which to test the hypothesized relationships. The positive relationships found may be stronger in cultures that more readily embrace autocratic leadership. Thus, replicating and contrasting these results in high power distance cultures are of interest and future work in other national, ethnic and company cultures on this is needed.

Our findings have implications for managers in terms of when autocratic leadership in teams is more likely to foster or more likely to hamper the psychological safety of the work environment that contributes to organizational performance. Autocratic leadership has the potential to help or hurt psychological safety and even bottom-line team performance irrespective of considerate leader behaviors, depending on the level of power struggles within the team. Thus it is worthwhile for organizations to utilize human resource practices to try to impact the utilization of autocratic leader behavior in different settings. Development programs can help in making leaders aware that their behavior may lead to different reactions depending on the presence of team power struggles and learn that leaders need to adapt their behaviors where needed. Leaders can, for example, be coached in toning down their controlling and power centralizing leader behaviors in situations characterized by high power struggles. Stimulating autocratic leader behavior in conditions low in power struggles may however be risky, given that power struggles can easily develop or deepen (Greer & Van Kleef, 2010) and autocratic leadership can hurt team psychological safety and bottom-line team performance under conditions of high team power struggles. Thus, the effects of autocratic leadership over time are not yet sufficiently clear. We also know little about the ability of leaders to alternate between higher and lower levels of autocratic leadership and even less about whether or not team members

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