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On an ego trip: the relationship between supervisory responsibility and leader altruistic behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – Prominent corporate scandals involving companies like Wirecard, Enron, VW and Tyco underscore the corrupting influence of power, with leaders often engaging in antisocial behaviors. Provoked by this, this study investigates the relationship between supervisory responsibility and one specific dimension of altruistic behavior. Understanding the dynamics of how structural power, particularly supervisory responsibility, associates with altruistic behavior is essential for organizations, given the well-documented advantages of altruistic leaders in terms of performance, innovation or ethical leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing upon the approach-inhibition theory of power, this article proposes that individuals with greater structural power in terms of prolonged duration and greater scope of supervisory responsibility will show diminished altruistic behavior. Following theoretical considerations, power influences leaders' behavior by decreasing attentiveness, reducing empathy and increasing self-focus. The study uses recent German linked employer-employee data to test the relationship between supervisory responsibility and one specific dimension of leader altruistic behavior ($n = 2,752$).

Findings – The results support that a prolonged duration and a greater scope of supervisory responsibility correlate negatively with the dimension of leader altruistic behavior under study.

Originality/value – The research empirically validates the findings on behavioral consequences of structural power from experimental settings for organizational leaders by explicitly focusing on the duration and the scope of supervisory responsibility. The findings provide useful insights for organizations concerning leader selection and leader governance mechanisms.

Keywords Supervisory responsibility, Leadership, Altruism, Egoism

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Wirecard, Enron, VW or Tyco are just a few of the names included in high-profile corporate scandals, providing anecdotal evidence of the corrupting influence of power. This influence often leads individuals to exploit others, enrich themselves and engage in antisocial behaviors. However, having more moral leaders is not only essential to the merit of society but also for achieving sustainable organizational success (Lemoine *et al.*, 2019). Above all, organizations should be particularly interested in having altruistic leaders, as research indicates that such leaders increase performance (Barghouti *et al.*, 2023; Mallén *et al.*, 2015; Melis and Nawaz, 2023), foster innovation (Domínguez Escrig *et al.*, 2016), enhance organizational learning (Guinot *et al.*, 2016), promote ethical leadership (Haar *et al.*, 2019) and contribute to greater workplace happiness (Boddy and Taplin, 2016; Salas-Vallina and Alegre, 2018). Additionally, altruism as one dimension of organizational citizenship behavior contributes to an organization's overall effectiveness (Kim, 2006). Avolio and Locke (2002) define leader altruism as a leader's tendency to self-sacrifice for the benefit and well-being of others. According to this definition, altruism consists of two parts: self-sacrifice, representing the intentional perspective of altruism and increasing others' well-being, representing the consequentialist perspective of altruism. Given the broad and complex nature of the construct of altruism and the difficulty in conceptualizing it as a single construct, this study focuses on one specific dimension of altruistic behavior: the consequentialist perspective. I build on the conceptualization of Pfattheicher *et al.* (2022), who categorize altruism – from a

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consequentialist perspective – as behavior that incurs costs for the actor, whether monetary or non-monetary and benefits the recipient. Thus, this study focuses on the consequential dimension of altruistic behavior characterized by a willingness to share with others without expecting anything in return, not explicitly focusing on the self-sacrificing dimension of altruism.

Concerning individual consequences, previous literature found that the power leaders have can motivate both positive and negative behavior (Foult et al., 2020), but the precise relationship between power and different moral behaviors remains unclear (Bendahan et al., 2015). While power typically stems from an individual's organizational position and personal characteristics (Ladkin and Probert, 2021), this study specifically focuses on supervisory responsibility as a form of structural power, which is the power coming from an individual's position within an organizational hierarchy.

Based on the approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003), I posit that individuals possessing greater structural power, characterized by longer duration and a greater scope of supervisory responsibility, tend to exhibit behavior characterized by diminished attentiveness, reduced empathy and increased self-focus, which leads to a decline in altruistic behavior. Therefore, to investigate the moral behavior of leaders within an organization, this study delves into the association of supervisory responsibility and one specific dimension of leader altruistic behavior as one form of moral behavior. In particular, this study explores the roles of both the duration and the scope of supervisory responsibility in shaping these dynamics.

Based on recent linked employer-employee data from Germany, the results suggest that extended durations in leadership positions and an increased scope of supervisory responsibility are associated with diminished levels of the specific dimension of altruistic behavior under study. A more profound comprehension of the question of how structural power, particularly supervisory responsibility, shapes altruistic tendencies may help organizations in predicting leaders' behavior to adequately shape leader selection and leader governance mechanisms more effectively.

This research contributes to the literature in two key dimensions. There have been discussions in the literature on the relationship between (the sense of) power and selfish, prosocial and antisocial behavior (Bendahan et al., 2015; Cai and Liu, 2019; Cremer and van Dijk, 2005; DeCelles et al., 2012; Dubois et al., 2015; Handgraaf et al., 2008; Giurge et al., 2021; van Kleef et al., 2008; Foult et al., 2018). Whereas these studies explore the psychological experience of power in controlled laboratory settings and not in the employment context, I complement this literature by focusing on structural power, i.e. having supervisory responsibility for an extended duration and the actual scope of supervisory responsibility, as it is prevalent in organizational settings. While psychological power refers to feeling powerful, structural power entails actual control over valuable resources (Tost and Johnson, 2019). This distinction is crucial, as leaders in real hierarchical settings must navigate numerous responsibilities (Giurge et al., 2021) and competing cognitive demands (Schmid Mast et al., 2009), making it imperative to move beyond the mere contemplation of power or the recalling of past events of power, which significantly differs from real structural power (Flynn et al., 2011). By scrutinizing the generalizability of findings from experimental settings and psychological power studies to actual leadership positions with supervisory responsibility in the field, this research enhances the external validity of these conclusions (Rus et al., 2010). This, in turn, provides valuable insights for organizations when adjusting their leadership governance mechanisms in order to monitor the behavior of specific leaders more closely.

Furthermore, this article contributes to the existing literature by addressing the temporal dimension of the relationship between structural power and leaders' behavioral patterns. Previous research conducted in controlled experimental settings dedicated little attention to time-scaling, which differs significantly from real-life organizational scenarios (Berger et al., 2020). While Bendahan et al. (2015) attempted to incorporate a time dimension through a two-period game within their laboratory contexts, this does not capture prolonged timespans that

characterize leadership positions. Given that supervisors typically occupy their leadership positions over multiple years and organizations rarely revoke their decision on supervisory responsibility once granted, it is relevant to explore the long-term dynamics of supervisory responsibility and its association with leader altruism within organizational contexts. Briefly, this research not only advances our understanding of structural power and its connection with leader behavior by scrutinizing supervisory responsibility and its scope on one dimension of static leader altruistic behavior but also enriches our insights into how this specific dimension of altruistic behavior at entry associates with different periods in leadership positions in real-world settings.

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides a brief discussion of previous literature and describes the theoretical background deriving the hypotheses of this paper. I describe the German linked employer-employee dataset, the variables and the empirical strategy that I use for the empirical analyses in the proceeding section. In the following, I present the estimation results, which support the predicted relationships. This section is followed by a discussion section, where I discuss the results, their robustness, potential implications and limitations. Finally, the last section concludes.

2. Literature and hypotheses development

As already stated above, structural power in the workplace predominantly emanates from organizational positions (Ladkin and Probert, 2021). Correspondingly, this article focuses on supervisory responsibility as a facet of structural power within organizational contexts. Therefore, this study builds upon existing research concerning structural power and leaders' behavioral patterns that argue that power fosters self-interest (Burke, 2006), induces the perception that the less powerful are less worthy and increases prejudice (Bendahan *et al.*, 2015). Bendahan *et al.* (2015) intended to construct structural power within experimental settings, whereas Tost and Johnson (2019) and Wisse and Rus (2012) investigated the relationship between power and solidarity, respectively, self-interested behavior within an organizational context. Although Tost and Johnson (2019) found that power induces feelings of solidarity, they did not find any impact of supervisor tenure on behavioral solidarity. The same is true for the study of Wisse and Rus (2012) concerning power and leader self-interested behavior. Additionally, even though both articles limit their studies to supervisors, they rely on self-rated power measures and do not quantify structural power objectively within an organizational setting. Moreover, in the context of organizations, Rus *et al.* (2010) examined the associations between structural power and self-serving behavior among leaders, building on the approach-inhibition theory of power by Keltner *et al.* (2003).

I follow the line of argumentation of Rus *et al.* (2010) to develop the theoretical argument for why supervisory responsibility reduces altruistic behavior. The approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner *et al.*, 2003) posits that individuals with varying levels of power exhibit distinct behavioral patterns within the same social environment. Low-power individuals tend to express inhibition-related behavior as they carefully attend to others to navigate more threatening social environments (Keltner *et al.*, 2003). Conversely, high-power individuals tend to display behavior characterized by approach-related tendencies because the experience of power is associated with elevated self-esteem and a sense of independence and freedom (Keltner *et al.*, 2003; Kipnis, 1972). When individuals feel independent of others, they focus more on pursuing their own interests and goals (Tost and Johnson, 2019). This shift in behavior is associated with powerholders being less attentive and responsive to others' needs (Keltner *et al.*, 2003; Tost and Johnson, 2019). With an increasing scope of power, individuals also experience difficulty empathizing with others and focus less on the psychological experiences of those around them (Galinsky *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, those in power maintain greater psychological distance from the less powerful (Kipnis, 1972), inhibit their compassion for others (Kipnis, 1976) and show an egocentric orientation to social encounters (Blader and Chen, 2012), sometimes even enacting in socially inappropriate ways (Keltner *et al.*, 2003).

Considering scenarios within organizational structures, one specific form of power is leadership positions with supervisory responsibility because individuals in such positions hold authority and decision-making power over others. When I transfer the observed behavior patterns associated with power to leadership positions with supervisory responsibility, I claim that the decreased attentiveness to others, the reduced empathy and the increased focus on personal goals and desires – all associated with the inhibition of structural power – contribute to a decline in altruistic behavior.

Two directions emerge from this line of argumentation: First, when individuals become manifested in their positions of power, their behavior associated with this structural power, and therefore supervisory responsibility, does not change immediately when obtaining a leadership position with supervisory responsibility but rather evolves over time. Consequently, I propose that the impact of supervisory responsibility on altruistic behavior will be a gradual change that occurs over the duration of holding such a position. This leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1.* The duration of having supervisory responsibility is negatively related to leader altruistic behavior.

Second, not only the duration of being in a leadership position with supervisory responsibility but also how much supervisory responsibility an individual has matters. Previous research has provided only limited insights into the influence of the scope of power referring to the number of subordinates on leaders' behavioral patterns. [Rus et al. \(2010\)](#) reported no significant association between the number of subordinates and self-serving behavior among leaders. In contrast, [Bendahan et al. \(2015\)](#) suggested that an increase in the scope of power induces corruptive behavior, and [Giurge et al. \(2021\)](#) contended that increased power could lead to a decline in principled moral reasoning, both owing to enhanced self-interest among leaders. I follow this existing literature and assert that the more supervisory responsibility individuals have, the more powerful they feel. With this increasing scope of structural power, they develop the above-mentioned behavior more profoundly: they become more self-focused, less attentive and less empathic to others, which ultimately results in decreased altruistic behavior. I, therefore, advance the following hypothesis:

- H2.* The scope of supervisory responsibility is negatively related to leader altruistic behavior.

3. Methods

3.1 Sample

For the empirical analyses, this study utilizes data from the Linked Personnel Panel (LPP) ([Ruf et al., 2020, 2022](#)), a distinctive dataset provided by the German Institute of Employment Research (IAB). The LPP data are representative of German private-sector establishments with a workforce of at least 50 employees subject to social security contributions. The data collection consisted of five waves conducted in the years 2012/2013, 2014/2015, 2016/2017, 2018/2019 and 2020/2021. These waves are based on surveys conducted with both employees and their employers, resulting in the availability of a linked employer-employee dataset. Since the dependent variable of *altruism* is only observed from wave 2 onwards, I restrict the sample to the last four waves. Additionally, I merge the LPP data with the IAB Establishment Panel to acquire additional structural information about the establishments, such as their industry and the state where they are located.

To test the theoretical predictions, I restrict the sample to employees aged 67 or younger, in line with the statutory retirement age in Germany. Most importantly, to counteract the argument of less-altruistic individuals selecting into leadership positions with supervisory responsibility ([Bendahan et al., 2015](#)), I limit the sample to individuals in leadership positions with supervisory responsibility. After implementing these steps, the final sample comprises 2,752 individuals in leadership positions with supervisory responsibility employed by 904 employers.

3.2 Measures

I measure the dependent variable *altruism* with employees' self-rated willingness to share with others without expecting anything in return on a scale from 0 (no willingness to share) to 10 (high willingness to share). This measure is observed whenever the individual enters the sample starting from wave 2 onwards. This operationalization aligns with the theoretical definition of the consequentialist dimension of altruistic behavior used in this manuscript.

To quantify the *duration of supervisory responsibility*, I use the question – “For how many years have you been in charge of other persons regardless of your current position?” – which is a follow-up question for individuals who claim to supervise others. I operationalize the main independent variable, the *duration of supervisory responsibility*, as a continuous measure that reflects the number of years an individual has held a leadership position with supervisory responsibility. Given that I restrict the sample to individuals with supervisory responsibility, this variable accounts for the number of years an individual has had supervisory responsibility at entry into the sample. To measure the *scope of supervisory responsibility*, I utilize the question – “How many people work under your direction?” – which is also a follow-up question for individuals who supervise at least one person. The variable is a continuous measure of the number of individuals an employee supervises.

Additionally, several other factors influence both the duration and the scope of supervisory responsibility, and an individual's altruistic behavior. Thus, I follow the literature on altruism and control for personal as well as situational factors (Andreoni and Vesterlund, 2001; Babalola et al., 2023; Dargan and Schermer, 2022; Loi et al., 2011; Nakavachara, 2018; Oda et al., 2014; Furnham et al., 2016). Since personal attributes shape an individual's behavior, I include various personal characteristics, in particular, whether an individual is *female*, their *age*, the *number of children* below the age of 14 that live within their household, their personality using the *Big Five personality characteristics*, their willingness to take risks and five dummy variables indicating an individual's *education level*. Further, within this group, I control whether the individual is born in *Germany* to capture any cultural differences in altruistic behavior. Situational factors comprise whether an individual has a *permanent contract* to represent job (in)security, 15 industry dummy variables to capture any selection effects into specific industries and 16 state dummies to control for historic or financial regional differences in altruistic behavior. Finally, to control for time effects, I add a dummy variable for each survey wave.

3.3 Estimation strategy

To capture the effect of the duration and the scope of supervisory responsibility on altruism, I estimate a pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) model. Because altruism is only measured once employees enter the survey, there is no variation in altruism within individuals over time. Therefore, I use the time structure of the data implicitly: I do not estimate the incident of occupying a leadership position with supervisory responsibility on altruism over various years, and therefore, I do not estimate the evolution of altruism over time. Instead, I analyze how supervisory responsibility correlates with the level of altruism by comparing altruism between individuals with different durations in positions with supervisory responsibility, solely relying on variation in altruism between individuals. To account for correlations within establishments, as multiple individuals are drawn from the same employer, I cluster standard errors at the establishment level.

4. Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all study variables, whereas Table 2 presents correlations among the variables of interest. Notably, the altruism scores reveal a mean of 7.7 out of a maximum of 10. Moreover, the descriptive statistics highlight that individuals within the sample have accumulated on average 11.8 years of experience in leadership positions with

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Main variables</i>				
Altruism	7.651	1.506	0	10
Duration of supervisory responsibility	11.771	8.956	0.5	44
Scope of supervisory responsibility	24.183	104.014	1	3120
<i>Control variables</i>				
Female	0.170	–	0	1
Age	47.487	9.427	20	67
Number of children	0.481	0.802	0	5
Extraversion	3.713	0.740	1	5
Agreeableness	3.993	0.567	1.667	5
Conscientiousness	4.365	0.474	2.667	5
Neuroticism	2.597	0.736	1	5
Openness	3.690	0.600	1	5
Risk-seeking	5.851	1.839	0	10
Education				
apprenticeship	0.331	–	0	1
training college	0.065	–	0	1
technical college	0.287	–	0	1
university degree	0.305	–	0	1
no/other education	0.012	–	0	1
Country of birth: Germany	0.940	–	0	1
Permanent contract	0.976	–	0	1

Note(s): N(individuals) = 2,752, N(establisments) = 904

Source(s): Own calculations based on data from the LPP 2014–2021 and the IAB Establishment Panel 2014–2021

Table 2. Correlation matrix of the main variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Altruism	1.000		
(2) Duration of supervisory responsibility	–0.059**	1.000	
(3) Scope of supervisory responsibility	–0.031	0.066***	1.000

Note(s): N(individuals) = 2,752, N(establisments) = 904; *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05 and ***p < 0.01

Source(s): Own calculations based on data from the LPP 2014–2021 and the IAB Establishment Panel 2014–2021

supervisory responsibility, regardless of employer changes. These leaders are mostly male, comprising 83% of the sample and, on average, supervise 24.2 employees. Turning to [Table 2](#), the duration of supervisory responsibility is statistically significantly negatively correlated to leader altruism as expected ($p < 0.05$), whereas the correlation coefficient between the scope of supervisory responsibility and leader altruism is not statistically significant.

To test the relationship between supervisory responsibility and leader altruistic behavior, I examine the results of the OLS estimations displayed in [Table 3](#). The results concerning the *duration of supervisory responsibility* ([Hypothesis 1](#)) reveal a statistically significant negative regression coefficient as depicted in Models M1 and M2 of [Table 3](#) (M2: $\beta = -0.011$; $p < 0.05$). These results indicate empirical support for [Hypothesis 1](#), suggesting that altruistic tendencies are associated with more time spent in a leadership position with supervisory responsibility. Specifically, an additional year of experience in a leadership position with supervisory responsibility is associated with a decline of around 0.011 points on the altruism

Table 3. Ordinary least squares estimations of leader altruism

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Duration of supervisory responsibility	−0.011** (0.004)	−0.011** (0.005)		
Scope of supervisory responsibility ^a			−0.005* (0.003)	−0.005** (0.003)
Female (ref.: male)	0.209*** (0.072)	0.152* (0.078)	0.223*** (0.072)	0.162** (0.078)
Age ^a	0.065* (0.038)	0.061 (0.039)	0.005 (0.033)	0.004 (0.033)
Number of children	0.019 (0.038)	0.013 (0.038)	0.025 (0.038)	0.018 (0.038)
Extraversion	0.165*** (0.047)	0.165*** (0.047)	0.164*** (0.047)	0.163*** (0.047)
Agreeableness	0.389*** (0.054)	0.385*** (0.055)	0.397*** (0.054)	0.391*** (0.056)
Conscientiousness	0.040 (0.064)	0.037 (0.064)	0.038 (0.064)	0.036 (0.065)
Neuroticism	0.014 (0.040)	0.024 (0.040)	0.014 (0.040)	0.025 (0.040)
Openness	0.248*** (0.053)	0.244*** (0.053)	0.246*** (0.053)	0.243*** (0.054)
Risk-seeking	0.066*** (0.017)	0.067*** (0.017)	0.065*** (0.017)	0.066*** (0.017)
Rducation (ref.: apprenticeship)				
training college	0.006 (0.113)	−0.013 (0.115)	−0.002 (0.113)	−0.021 (0.115)
technical college	−0.061 (0.074)	−0.058 (0.075)	−0.086 (0.073)	−0.081 (0.075)
university degree	−0.155** (0.069)	−0.172** (0.071)	−0.161** (0.069)	−0.179** (0.071)
no/other education	−0.288 (0.327)	−0.384 (0.338)	−0.290 (0.331)	−0.388 (0.342)
Country of birth: Germany (ref.: all other countries)	−0.277** (0.117)	−0.290** (0.120)	−0.299** (0.117)	−0.309** (0.120)
Permanent contract (ref.: fixed-term)	0.056 (0.161)	0.059 (0.155)	0.042 (0.161)	0.048 (0.155)
Constant	4.015*** (0.451)	4.027*** (0.469)	4.213*** (0.455)	4.212*** (0.470)
Survey wave dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes
Industry fixed effects	no	yes	no	yes
State fixed effects	no	yes	no	yes
Number of observations/employees	2,752	2,752	2,752	2,752
Adjusted R ²	0.071	0.071	0.069	0.070

Note(s): N(establishments) = 904; standard errors clustered at the establishment level in parentheses;
^a coefficient and standard error multiplied by 10; *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01
Source(s): Own calculations based on data from the LPP 2014–2021 and the IAB Establishment Panel 2014–2021

scale, which ranges from 0 to 10. This might seem very small, but considering a mean duration of 11.8 years of supervisory responsibility (Table 1), this sums up to 0.13 points on the altruism scale and underlines the magnitude of the potential impact of prolonged leadership positions on altruistic behavior.

Regarding Hypothesis 2, which postulates a negative association between the scope of supervisory responsibility and altruistic behavior, the relevant findings are presented in

Columns 3 and 4 of [Table 3](#). As shown, the coefficient of the *scope of supervisory responsibility* is statistically significant and negative (M4: $\beta = -0.0005$; $p < 0.05$). In alignment with the theoretical underpinnings, the number of subordinates under a leader's supervision is negatively correlated with leader altruistic behavior. These results provide supportive evidence in favor of the prediction that more supervisory responsibility, i.e. more structural power, tends to induce reduced levels of altruistic behavior among leaders.

5. Discussion

5.1 Contributions and practical implications

Building on the approach-inhibition theory of power by [Keltner et al. \(2003\)](#), this study provides insights into the relationship between the duration and the scope of supervisory responsibility and leader altruistic behavior. Consistent with the theory, the results of the empirical analyses indicate that individuals who occupy leadership positions with supervisory responsibility for a longer duration tend to show less altruistic tendencies concerning the specific definition of altruism used in this study. The same is suggested when reflecting on the scope of supervisory responsibility, represented by the number of subordinates an individual supervises. This pattern is consistent with the theory's assertion that high-power individuals tend to demonstrate approach-related behavior, characterized by a focus on personal goals and independence ([Keltner et al., 2003](#); [Kipnis, 1972, 1976](#)). Furthermore, the observed correlation between supervisory responsibility and diminished altruism supports the notion that increased power is associated with decreased concern for others' welfare, as posited by the theory. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of how power dynamics relate to behavior within organizational contexts, shedding light on the complex interplay between leadership roles, power dynamics and altruistic tendencies. With the results, this article relates and contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it relates to the literature on power, specifically the sense of power and various selfish, prosocial and antisocial behaviors ([Bendahan et al., 2015](#); [Cai and Liu, 2019](#); [Cremer and van Dijk, 2005](#); [DeCelles et al., 2012](#); [Dubois et al., 2015](#); [Giurge et al., 2021](#); [Handgraaf et al., 2008](#); [van Kleef et al., 2008](#); [Foulk et al., 2018](#)), mostly conducted in experimental settings. Consistent with this previous research, the study's findings support the view that the more powerful individuals become, the more egoistic, i.e. the less altruistic they behave. In contrast to previous research, this study goes beyond the laboratory settings and uses rich employer-employee data to validate the results found in the laboratory setting in the corporate context. In doing so, I not only use data from the field, which has previously only been undertaken in a relatively small sample by [Rus et al. \(2010\)](#), but I also shift the focus from the perception of power to structural power, representing the power given by an organizational hierarchy and the position an individual occupies. These considerations strengthen the practical implications derived from experimental settings, extending their relevance to the corporate domain. Given that altruistic leaders, among others, enhance performance ([Melis and Nawaz, 2023](#)), increase innovation ([Domínguez Escrig et al., 2016](#)) and improve organizational learning ([Guinot et al., 2016](#)), the findings serve to enhance the evaluation and selection of prospective leaders, underscoring the importance of organizations choosing their leaders based on moral values, such as their altruistic conduct, as a means to foster responsible and ethical leadership within their organization ([Haar et al., 2019](#)).

Second, the present research extends these findings from prior literature by additionally introducing a temporal dimension. It demonstrates that the prolonged duration of supervisory responsibility correlates negatively with leader altruistic behavior. Investigating these dynamics of supervisory responsibility and its impact on leader altruistic behavior within organizational settings is relevant, taking into account that supervisors commonly maintain their leadership positions for extended periods. Given the documented benefits of having altruistic leaders, organizations should incorporate this aspect into their leadership governance strategies. This ensures effective oversight of their leaders, particularly those with long-term

tenures, thus maintaining alignment with the organization's objectives. Additionally, in instances where leaders bear a great scope of supervisory responsibility, organizations should evaluate the congruence of their personalities with the prevailing corporate culture and values. To address the potential decline of altruistic tendencies among long-term leaders or leaders with a great scope of supervisory responsibility, it may be advisable for organizations to integrate personality development components into their leadership development programs. In the absence of such programs, initializing them becomes advisable, considering the suggested differences between long-term and short-term leaders. Notably, in certain contexts, the absence of altruistic traits for leaders may be preferred. Therefore, talent management tools should incorporate this personality aspect into the competency profiles of leadership positions, particularly in the context of succession planning. This ensures that organizations can effectively manage their talents and maintain continuity in leadership positions aligned with their organizational goals.

Upon examining the findings presented in [Table 3](#), the results of the control variables align with existing literature. The statistically significant and positive coefficient associated with being female reinforces previous research indicating that women often display greater altruistic tendencies than men ([Andreoni and Vesterlund, 2001](#)). Additionally, the results suggest a positive correlation between the Big Five personality dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness and openness with altruism. This supports the conclusions drawn by [Furnham et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Oda et al. \(2014\)](#). Reinforcing the insights provided by [Dargan and Schermer \(2022\)](#), this study also suggests a positive relationship between risk-taking behavior and altruism. This association may stem from individuals inclined to take risks being more receptive to altruistic acts, either due to a lack of fear or because those predisposed to altruism also tend to rate themselves higher on risk-taking behavior due to a shared trait of self-assurance. Lastly, this study reveals cultural differences within altruistic tendencies, with individuals born in Germany exhibiting lower levels of altruism compared to their counterparts from other countries. This discrepancy could be attributed to the predominance of individualistic values in the German culture, whereas cultures that prioritize collectivist values often display heightened altruistic behaviors.

Moreover, prior research indicates that individuals with greater financial resources (e.g. [Hoffman, 2011](#); [Nakavachara, 2018](#)) or heightened satisfaction with their financial situation at work ([Bui et al., 2021](#)) often display more altruistic tendencies. This prompts the consideration that it might not be solely supervisory responsibility that influences altruism, but rather the financial context it entails. Despite this, the findings of this study reveal a negative correlation between supervisory responsibility and altruism, suggesting that even if financial factors were at play, this study would at most underestimate the effect.

5.2 Robustness, limitations and future directions

To demonstrate the validity of the empirical results, I present several robustness checks in [Table 4](#). For brevity, [Table 4](#) only presents the results relating to the main variables. The results concerning the control variables accord with those from the main models and can be obtained from the author on request.

First, due to the data collection process, multiple employees are drawn from various establishments. As a result, this study compares supervisors from different establishments with each other. Considering that corporate ethical values differ between establishments and may, in consequence, influence altruistic behavior differently between establishments ([Valentine et al., 2011](#)), I explicitly account for this hierarchical structure of the data. Thus, I reestimate Models M2 and M4 using a multilevel approach following [Steenbergen and Jones \(2002\)](#). This approach offers more accurate inferences by explicitly recognizing that observations tend to be more alike within workplaces than across them. As the results of Models R1 and R2 in [Table 4](#) show, the outcomes of these multilevel analyses indicate consistent findings.

	R1 Multilevel	R2 Multilevel	R3 Linear	R4 Heckman	R5 Heckman	R6 Log-lin	R7 Log-lin
Duration of supervisory responsibility	−0.011** (0.004)		−0.010** (0.004)	−0.011*** (0.004)		−0.002** (0.001)	
Scope of supervisory responsibility ^a		−0.005** (0.003)	−0.005* (0.003)		−0.005* (0.003)		−0.0008** (0.0004)
Constant	4.006*** (0.468)	4.194*** (0.468)	4.039*** (0.469)	4.963*** (0.659)	5.133*** (0.657)	1.726*** (0.064)	1.758*** (0.066)
Heckman selection equation							
Vigor				0.017 (0.027)	−0.017 (0.027)		
Dedication				0.172*** (0.028)	0.172*** (0.028)		
Absorption				0.016 (0.025)	−0.016 (0.025)		
Commitment				0.025*** (0.003)	0.025*** (0.003)		
Constant				1.845*** (0.275)	−1.845*** (0.275)		
Inverse mill's ratio λ_i				−0.551*** (0.192)	−0.548*** (0.192)		
Control variables (as in M2, Table 3)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Survey wave dummies, industry fixed effects, state fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Number of observations/individuals	2,752	2,752	2,752	11,747	11,747	2,752	2,752
Log-pseudo-Likelihood (R1, R2, R6, R7), adjusted R^2 (R3) and χ^2 (R4, R5)	−4,903.928	−4,905.724	0.072	259.078	254.906	535.590	532.122

Note(s): R1, R2: N(establishments) = 904; R4, R5: N(selected) = 2,719, N(non-selected) = 9,028; standard errors clustered at the establishment level in parentheses; ^a coefficient and standard error multiplied by 10; * p < 0.10, **p < 0.05 and ***p < 0.01

Source(s): Own calculations based on data from the Linked Personnel Panel 2014–2021 and the IAB Establishment Panel 2014–2021

Second, from a theoretical perspective, it could be interesting to know whether the duration and the scope of supervisory responsibility are complementary or function as independent factors. Thus, I conducted an analysis incorporating both the duration and the scope of supervisory responsibility within a single model (Table 4, Model R3). Since both coefficients continue to be statistically significant and negative, the results point towards a complementary effect between both facets of having structural power in the workplace and leader altruism.

Furthermore, sample selection bias could be an issue in the present analyses. If unobservable characteristics influence both, a leader's level of altruism and their chances to occupy a leadership position with supervisory responsibility, the observed sample may be endogenous and no longer representative of the underlying population (Heckman, 1979). In line with Bendahan *et al.*'s (2015) argument that corrupt individuals select into positions of power, it seems plausible that individuals who inherently exhibit lower levels of altruism may intentionally seek leadership positions with supervisory responsibility. To reduce this bias, I limited the sample of the main analyses to supervisors only. To further address this potential bias stemming from non-random selection into such positions, I follow Bendahan *et al.*'s (2015) recommended solution and employ Heckman's (1979) two-step approach (Table 4, Models R4 and R5). In the first stage of this approach, I estimate a probit selection equation for a binary dependent variable identifying selection into a leadership position with supervisory responsibility. To mitigate collinearity concerns, I added four additional variables into this first-stage estimation: I include vigor, dedication, absorption – as a measure of personality and engagement – and commitment given that these factors influence the occupancy of leadership positions with supervisory responsibility (Li *et al.*, 2015; Schuh *et al.*, 2014; Deschacht, 2017). Notably, the results suggest statistically significant effects for dedication and commitment in the first stage, affirming the validity of the identifying assumption within this framework. Next, I follow Heckman (1979) and incorporate the estimated probabilities from the first stage as inverse Mill's ratio λ_i into the second stage of the regression model, which predicts leader altruism. This approach ensures that the outcome regression considers the potential impact of selection into leadership positions with supervisory responsibility. The results from the second stage suggest that even after accounting for this selection bias, the effects from the main models do not change.

Last, the dependent variable altruism is slightly left-skewed. To account for this non-normal distribution, I use the natural logarithm of the sum of one plus altruism as an alternative operationalization of the dependent variable altruism (Table 4, Models R6 and R7). The findings of the analyses concerning the alternative specification reveal robust results.

Nevertheless, the present study has some limitations that future research should address. First, the assessment of altruism in this study relies on self-reporting and does not exclusively focus on altruism in the work context. An alternative approach might involve considering subordinates' evaluations of their leaders' level of altruism, similar to the approach employed by Bell and Hughes-Jones (2008) in their study on moral behavior. This could provide valuable insights to validate the current results from a different perspective. Additionally, due to data constraints, this study was limited to the use of a single-item measure of altruism to reflect one dimension of altruistic behavior. Given the diversity and different dimensions of altruistic behaviors, the findings are specific to this consequentialist dimension of altruistic behavior examined in this study and may not apply to other dimensions of altruism. Future research should rely, if possible, on multiple-item scales to enhance the reliability and generalizability of the findings, particularly focusing on a more holistic approach to altruism.

Second, another limitation of the present study is its (pooled) cross-sectional nature, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships due to temporal ambiguity. Given that altruism is only observed upon an individual's entry into the sample, it is not possible to assess changes in altruism within individuals over time. Despite the effort to account for the temporal aspect in the analyses of the duration of supervisory responsibility by considering the accumulated years in such positions, the examination of the scope of supervisory responsibility lacks the use of any time structure. Moreover, given the cross-sectional

nature of the data and the analytical procedures employed, it is possible that reverse causality – where altruistic tendencies influence the development of leadership – might be an issue.

To address this potential issue, it would be necessary to control for an individual's level of altruism prior to obtaining supervisory responsibility for the first time, ensuring that the results are not confounded by less-altruistic individuals becoming leaders in the first place. However, the dataset of this study does not allow for the observation of baseline levels of altruism. Therefore, I follow the literature that claims that personality traits, such as the Big Five (e.g. [Doornenbal et al., 2022](#); [Fietze et al., 2011](#)), play a significant role in obtaining leadership positions with supervisory responsibility. Then, considering the close relationship between the Big Five traits and altruism ([Furnham et al., 2016](#)), it is plausible that altruism could also determine the acquisition of supervisory responsibility. Therefore, to mitigate this issue of reverse causality, I control for various individual characteristics, particularly the Big Five personality traits, since I cannot control for altruistic tendencies prior to obtaining supervisory responsibility. However, I cannot entirely preclude simultaneous causality from the analyses. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as correlations. Future research could engage in analyses with a longer panel to make use of variation in supervisory responsibility over time. This would be instrumental in identifying the causal effect of how altruism evolves over time. Additionally, future studies could engage in disentangling the simultaneous effect of supervisory responsibility and altruistic behavior by observing individuals over a longer period to determine whether and how leadership progression depends on an individual's altruistic tendencies.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this research explores the connection between structural power, specifically supervisory responsibility and leader altruistic behavior in organizational contexts. Unlike previous studies in controlled laboratory settings, this research focuses on rich observational employer-employee data. It also considers the temporal aspect, examining how a prolonged duration of supervisory responsibility correlates with leader altruistic behavior. The empirical analysis shows that supervisory responsibility negatively correlates with a leader's level of altruistic behavior – when considering only the consequentialist dimension of it. To be more specific, the results indicate that both the duration in a leadership position with supervisory responsibility and the scope of supervisory responsibility indicate a decline in this particular dimension of a leader's level of altruistic behavior. Thus, this study enriches our understanding of long-term leader altruistic behavior and given that altruistic leaders benefit organizations in various ways (e.g. [Melis and Nawaz, 2023](#); [Guinot et al., 2016](#)), it highlights the importance for organizations to have explicit governance strategies and leadership development programs and to engage in behavioral leadership research in the future.

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