Leadership

Context and conditions matter: Stress and strain in the exercise of leadership power

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Abstract
Current research shows that a significant number of leaders suffer from strain which effects their application of power. This is a highly relevant leadership issue in today's challenging business world. This study applies conservation of resources theory and the critical leadership studies approach to re-think leadership dynamics such as stressors and strain factors and their influence on power-related behaviour. The leader role, leader–member relations, workplace, organization and environment can be identified as resource passageways which create, maintain or limit the development of resources such as power-related behaviour. Research on the self-assessments of 43 German leaders from private sector shows that strain factors, leader role and leader–member relations can influence power-related behaviour. The data also show the importance of clarifying demands and expectations to prevent resource loss, otherwise overtaxed leaders are highly likely to use negative forms of power-related behaviour. The results demonstrate the need to improve understanding of the leader role with its increasing demands to be more flexible, agile and ambidextrous, but also to accept the human limitations of those who take on senior positions. Hence, the study findings demonstrate that context and conditions shape the situation in which leaders are embedded and therefore how to handle power is not only a problem for leaders themselves. The article also discusses the limitations of these findings and outlines possible directions for future research.

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Introduction

Power is a fundamental issue in current leadership theory and practice. Recent studies have shown that many leaders are unable to deal successfully with strain derived from change in the workplace, structure of work or the expectations of the 'new knowledge worker generation' (Rabenu, 2017). Negative forms of strain experienced by the leader can be distress, fatigue, monotony or saturation. This is dependent on the available resources (organizational support, work structure, team support), resource passageways (leader's role, leader–member relations, workplace, organization, environment) and the leader's personal capacities (traits, competencies, emotions and attitude).

The level of strain has a direct effect on the power-related behaviour of the leader (Rabenu, 2017; Rudow, 2005, 2014). Low levels of strain increase the probability that leaders use positive forms of power by focusing on their decisions (Guinote, 2017), or empowering themselves and others through solidarity (Berger, 2005; Dahl, 1957; McCullough, 2018). High levels of strain make leaders more likely to apply negative power-related behaviour driven by control, coercion, self-interest, dominance, punishment, corruption and force (McClelland, 1975) causing suffering (Zimber et al., 2015), or personal crises, setbacks and even mental breakdown (DuBrin, 2013; Hannah et al., 2009). Research investigating the relation between strain and the application of power-related behaviour is rare and it seems that mainstream leadership research has often neglected the issue of power. This study seeks to close this gap.

Leadership, leader role and power

Leadership and the issues within the leader role

Leading people is an intentional social interaction to achieve an organizational goal (Bass and Bass, 2009; Northouse, 2015). Leadership researchers have argued that in dealing effectively with today's complex organisational and social issues leaders need to be agile, flexible and ambidextrous (Collinson, 2014; Yukl, 2008). Leaders thereby act within continuous tension (Cardno, 2001, 2007) to achieve expected goals and to balance their own and others' expectations, social norms and values, limited by their own resources (Hoyt et al., 2013; Turner, 2001). This can increase the ambiguity of the role and cause role conflicts (Rizzo et al., 1970; Turner, 2001) which can lead to a feeling of being overtaxed by the demands of the role (Lee, 2011; Neuberger, 2002). Subsequently, the feeling of unmet role expectations can increase the risk of burnout (Everall and Paulson, 2004; Lait and Wallace, 2002; Maslach et al., 2001) with the result of intrapersonal conflicts (Hattie, 2014; Hoyt et al., 2013). Moreover, the leader can experience anxiety or other negative emotions if she/he feels threatened and tries to defend him/herself. This results in a negative spiral effect with more and more inner disorganization (Epstein, 1973).

Another idea about the leader role is 'being positive' derived from positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This focusses on a leaders' strengths, self-confidence, optimism and power. However, issues can arise, if a leaders' positivity leads to the refusal to acknowledge the facts, avoidance of difficult problems or belief that her/his positive narrative is disconnected from reality (Collinson, 2012). This so-called 'Prozac' leadership behaviour does not address the often underlying power asymmetry.

Followers may become more and more sceptical and cynical if the way the leader talks is inconsistent with her/his behaviour or the reality is not as she/he said (Collinson, 2012).

The leader role and the issue of power

Arguably, leadership and power are intertwined, because leaders enact power to encourage themselves and others to reach organizational goals (Ross et al., 2014). Other research has outlined that leadership is power or the exercise of power in specific situations (Zogjani and Llaci, 2014) or that leadership should be seen as the epiphenomenon of power (Janda, 1960). Overall, it can be argued that leadership situations are power-related situations. Power is the ability of person A to motivate person B to do something person B would not otherwise do regarding her/his own interests (Bass and Bass, 2009; Dahl, 1957;). Power is dependent on a leader's perceptions of her/his levels of control, relative to another's (Dahl, 1957; Guinote, 2017). It emerges from the negotiation of a shared reality between people (Guinote, 2017; Haslam et al., 2010) or is associated with leadership roles (Northouse, 2015).

A leader can use various categories of power-related behaviour such as 'power to', 'power with' and 'power over' (Salovaara and Bathurst, 2018). The category of 'power to' refers to the ability of a leader to create an intended outcome based on focusing on decisions, using their developed self-regulation, applying selective resource allocation and their ability to deal with complex problems (Guinote, 2017). The 'power to' category is the basis for the 'power with' category. This consists of the concept of empowerment and a collective action of the group to achieve a common goal embedded in solidarity, shared decision making, dialogue and negotiation (Bass and Bass, 2009; Galinsky et al., 2003; McCullough, 2018). The notion of 'power over' consists of the potential for a person to affect the behavioural patterns of others driven by control, coercion, self-interest, dominance, punishment, corruption and force (McClelland, 1975). The kind of power-related behaviour a leader chooses to apply, depends on various factors. For example, Guinote (2017) showed that power and corruption are related, but that their application depends on national culture (Torelli and Shavitt, 2010), organizational culture (Ashforth and Anand, 2003), power stability, intergroup conflict (Maner and Case, 2016), self-interests (Maner and Mead, 2010), moral identity (DeCelles et al., 2012), the task (Galinsky et al., 2003) and the predisposition of people in power (Sassenberg et al., 2014). Thereby leaders with narcissistic, Machiavellian or psychopathic personality tendencies (Padilla et al., 2007) tend to use power in a negative way (Furtner et al., 2017,). These types of leader are driven by selfish interests (Furtner et al., 2017).

The above discussion suggests that power-related behaviour emerges as a result of various interrelated factors such as the leaders' personality, their understanding of the leader role and leadership, power relations, context and particular conditions. Furthermore, leaders' power-related behaviour cannot be viewed as 'black or white' in the sense of good or bad. There are different views on power between good or bad emerging from a dynamic social reality. Today, the leaders' role is overloaded with expectations of what a 'good' leader is to such an extent that arguably no one can possibly deliver it. There seems to be an overarching issue of oversimplifying the complexity of the social phenomenon of leaders suffering from strain which could have significant impact on their power-related behaviour.

Stress and strain factors – Sources of power occurrence

The basic model of stress and strain was originally developed by Rohmert and Rutenfranz (1983) and later extended to social science in the field of psychological stress and strain (Desterreich, 2001). Figure 1 shows the stress–strain-resource model.

Stressors are the sum of all person-independent influences (Nachreiner and Schultetus, 2002; Rudow, 2014) having both positive and negative impact on the leaders' level of strain (Kirchner, 1993; Rohmert and Rutenfranz, 1983). Leaders can identify three types of changes that challenge their power (Rabenu, 2017). Firstly, they have to deal with changing workplaces such as smart factories (Rabenu, 2017). Secondly, they have to cope with role ambiguities driven by partner-oriented teamwork, shared and distributed leadership, decentralization of decision-making, and a lean or absent hierarchy of authority (Daft, 2015; Rabenu, 2017). Finally, they have to manage changes in the expectations and requirements of different generations of employees such as Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z (Rabenu, 2017).

Strain is the immediate result of stressors on the perception, cognition and emotional state of a leader, influenced by activated personal resources (Nachreiner and Schultetus, 2002; Rudow, 2014). The demonstration of power within strain situations is determined by the context and conditions (Rabenu, 2017). When leaders' resources are depleted by workplace stress, constructive behaviour can decrease and the possibility of destructive behaviour can increase (Einarsen et al., 2007; Krasikova et al., 2013).

Conservation of resources – Power

According to Rabenu (2017), the concept of power categories are related to a resource-based view of power adopted by the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2003). Power has been identified as a possible resource reservoir for leaders which can motivate them to maintain, develop and protect their resource caravans (association of linked resources) with the aim of achieving their personal goals and agency
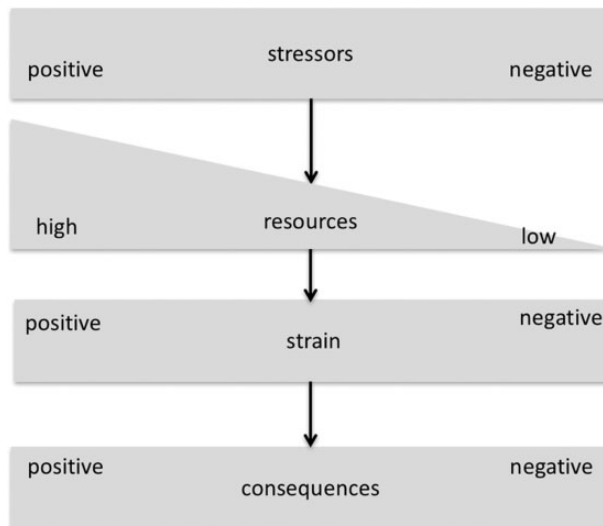

Figure 1. Stress–strain-resource model. Source: Rudow (2005).

(Hobfoll, 1989; Rabenu, 2017). For example, the 'power to' and the 'power with' categories describe empowerment, common goal achievement embedded in solidarity, shared decision making, dialogue and negotiation (Bass and Bass, 2009; Dahl, 1957; Galinsky et al., 2003; McCullough, 2018). Other researchers argue that the presence of power as a resource can increase the sense of responsibility with the effect that it motivates the leader to do what is best for her/his team (DeWall et al., 2011).

Conservation of resources – Stress and strain factors

Current research on conservation of resources theory focusses on how context and the conditions as resource passageways creates, maintains or limits the development of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Leaders' resources exist in a particular set of conditions that either foster or block the creation or application of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Particular conditions can increase leaders' resilience or fragility and the positive or negative use of resources such as morality or 'power-over' behaviour (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The resource passageways can cause the resource caravan to flounder, resulting in burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework embodies a collection of concepts and key factors and presumes the various relations among them (Jabareen, 2009). It also offers an interpretative understanding of the phenomenon under study (Levering, 2002). This conceptual framework is designed to identify stressors that shape situations in which leaders suffer from strain and which could have significant impact on their power-related behaviour.

This study aims to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: What stressors do leaders perceive in power-related situations?

RQ2: What strain factors do leaders perceive in power-related situations?

RQ3: Which strain factors could have a significant impact on leaders' power-related behaviour?

Based on the discussion of the related literature, Table 1 presents the identified stressors and strain factors in the following categories: environment, organization, leader–member relations, workplace and leader role.

The final conceptual framework (see Figure 2 below) is based on the stress–strain-resource model (see Figure 1) and includes the identified stressors and strain factors (see Table 1). The dashed arrow shows the relation between resources and strain, although this relation is not the primary focus of this study. The dotted arrow represents the relation between strain factors and the possible power-related leadership behaviour as a consequence of strain.

Method

Recruitment and participants

Data gathering used a snowball sampling technique (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Pattison et al., 2013). E-mails were sent to 123 German leaders and human resource managers from

Table 1. Identified stressors and strain factors.

Category	Reference
Environment	
National culture	Torelli and Shavitt (2010)
Rules, laws and norms of the society	Hayward and Lukes (2008)
VUCA conditions	Nogami et al. (1989); Raghuramapatruni and Rao Kosuri (2017), Lawrence (2014: 3)
Environmental changes	Hobfoll et al. (2018)
Organization	
Organizational culture	Ashforth and Anand (2003)
Intergroup conflict	Maner and Case (2016)
Corruption	Guinote (2017)
Rules, laws and norms of the organization	Hayward and Lukes (2008)
Leader–member relations	
Balance own and others' expectations social norms and values, limited by her/his own resources	Hoyt et al. (2013); Turner (2001)
Expectation of others	Hayward and Lukes (2008)
Changes in the expectations and requirements of different generations of employees such as Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z	Rabenu (2017)
Workplace	
The task	Galinsky et al. (2003)
Workplace stress	Avey et al. (2009)
Chronic stressors such as adverse workplaces	Cheung and Cheung (2013); Etzion et al. (1998); Kremer (2016)
Long-term exposure to stressors	Perrewé et al. (2002)
Leader role	
Role conflicts	Rizzo et al. (1970); Turner (2001)
Overtaxed by the demands of their leadership role	Lee (2011); Neuberger (2002)
Leadership roles	Guinote (2017); Northouse (2015)
Role ambiguities driven by partner-oriented teamwork, shared and distributed leadership, decentralization of decision-making and a lean or absent hierarchy of authority	Daft (2015); Rabenu (2017)

Source: The author.

private sector asking them to invite leaders from their companies. The sample size was influenced by the chosen research topic (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). Some leaders may feel uncomfortable talking about their experiences of stress and strain and are therefore not willing to participate in the survey. To reduce this bias, a snowball sampling was applied to reach such leaders, which made use of any existing trust relationship with their human resource managers (Bolton et al., 2010). Overall, 93 participants took part in the questionnaire and 43 completed it. The response rate of 35% is within the average response rate range of 33% for online surveys (Nulty, 2008).

The sample for this study is mainly balanced with 52.5% from women and 44.2% from men and one participant using the no answer option. At 41.9%, the majority of the leaders are representative of 41–50 age range, 32.6% are between 51 and 60 age range, and 23.3% are between 31 and 40 age range. Degree level of 'diploma' has the very high representation
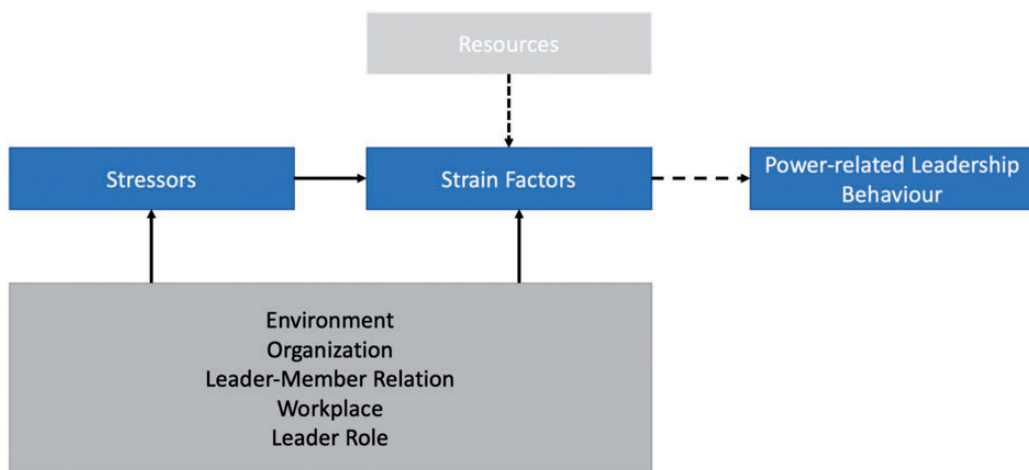
Figure 2. Conceptual framework. Source: The author, adopted from Rudow (2005).

of 39.5%. This could be because the majority (32.6%) of participants were located in the age range of 41–50 and the diploma is the academic degree in Germany. Non-academic education level is underrepresented with 23.2%. 55.8% of the leaders identified their leadership experience as more than 10 years, 32.6% varied between 1 year and less than 10 years, and 9.3% had less than one year's experience. The sample represents all hierarchical levels from top management with 23.3%, to team managers with 27.9% and the middle management category also with 27.9%. The sample of the study appears to represent all areas of responsibility, organizational level (25.6%), business unit level (32.6%), and 39.5% of the leaders were responsible for the team level. The manager-to-employee ratio shows that the sample of the study represents a wide range of ratios, with 51.1% of the managers leading less than 11 followers and 46.5% leading 21 or more and one participant using the no answer option.

Materials

This study applied a survey based on the self-administered structured interview questionnaire (Burgess, 2001; Kasunic, 2005), created as an online questionnaire (www.unfrageon line.com) (Lumsden, 2005). The participants were informed of the option to take a break at any time. The survey was structured in two parts. The first part consists of the introduction, the demographic information collected from the participants regarding their gender, age, academic education, date of leadership experiences, hierarchical level, areas of responsibility and the manager-to-employee ratio as well as two open-ended questions.

Open-ended questions encourage participants to answer in their own words (Krosnick, 2018). Furthermore, open-ended questions enable the participants to give spontaneous responses and thus reduce the risk of bias by pre-given answer options (Reja et al., 2003). Two open-ended questions were created to cover the main aspects of the topic under study. The first question focused on the leaders' perception of stressors within her/his current workplace: 'Please describe what is the biggest problem in leadership for you right now?' The second question examined the leaders' feeling of strain regarding the problem articulated beforehand (question 1): 'What are you currently most concerned about regarding this

problem? What are you worrying about?' The second part of the survey contained various closed-ended questions. This part is not relevant for this study.

Measures

A quantitative content analysis was applied to analyse the gathered data from the open-ended questions. Quantitative content analysis has been identified as an appropriate methodology for analysing open-ended questions (Früh, 2015; Rössler, 2017; Uhl, 2016). Berelson (1952) described quantitative content analysis as 'a research technique for the systematic, objective and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication' (p. 18). Quantitative content analysis is primarily based on a positivist research tradition and follows a deductive approach (White and Marsh, 2006). A coding scheme has to be developed before coding begins. This operationalizes concepts and establishes categories that allow answers to specific research questions or to test hypotheses. It is valid as it measures the indented concepts and is reliable as the measurement of the coding scheme by different coders producing the same result (Neuendorf and Kumar, 2002; Rourke and Anderson, 2004).

A code scheme (Table 2) was developed based on the identified stressors and strain factors (Table 1) derived from the literature review. It consists of a high-order category with contained lower-order categories as the base unit of stressors or strain factors.

The quantitative content analysis required a careful and iterative process of reading the gathered data, coding and recoding, because of its complexity and the possible bias of ambiguous meaning (White and Marsh, 2006).

Results

The result of the quantitative content analysis relates to the three research questions. The first result shows the frequency of identified stressors, the second represents the frequency of identified strain factors and the third outlines the frequency of strain factors related to particular stressors.

Stressors. The first research questions focused on the stressors that leaders perceive in the context of power-related situations. Table 3 shows the result of the analysis regarding frequency.

For more detailed understanding, an example of the coded text for each code category is represented in Table 4.

The participants gave the frequency of the indicated stressors the following ranking: leader role (34.9%), leader–member relations (23.3%), the organization (20.9%) the workplace (18.6%) and environment (2.3%). Within the higher-order category of leader role (34.9%) the contained lower-order category 'role ambiguities' has the highest frequency with 11.6% followed by 'leader role' with 9.3% and 'overtaxed demands of leader role' with 9.3%. The higher-order category leader–member relations (23.3%) is the sum of two balanced lower-order categories 'balance own and others' expectations' (11.6%) and 'changes in expectations of different generations' (11.6%). The highest frequency in the category organization (20.9%) has the lower-order category 'rules, laws and norms of the organization' with 14.0%. Included in the category workplace (18.6%) is the lower-order category 'the task' with 11.6%.

Table 2. Code scheme of stressors and strain factors.

Code number	Category
2000	**Environment**
2010	National culture
2020	Rules, laws and norms of the society
2030	VUCA conditions
2040	Environmental changes
2100	**Organization**
2110	Organizational culture
2120	Intergroup conflict
2130	Corruption
2140	Rules, laws and norms of the organization
2200	**Leader–member relations**
2210	Balance own and others' expectations, social norms and values
2220	Expectation of others
2230	Changes in the expectations from different generations of employees (Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z)
2300	**Workplace**
2310	The task
2320	Workplace stress
2340	Chronic stressors such adverse workplaces
2350	Long-term exposure to stressors
2400	**Leader role**
2410	Role conflicts
2420	Overtaxed by the demands of their leadership role
2430	Leadership roles (different)
2440	Role ambiguities driven by partner-oriented teamwork, shared and distributed leadership, decentralization of decision-making and a lean or absent hierarchy of authority

Source: The author.

Strain. The second research question asked what strain factors leaders perceive in power-related situations. Table 5 shows the result of the analysis of the frequency of strain factors.

For a more detailed understanding an example of the coded text for each code category is represented in Table 6.

Participants gave the frequency of the articulated strain factors the following ranking: leader role (34.9%), the leader–member relations (32.6%), the organization (18.6%) the workplace (7.0%) and environment (2.3%). The category 'no strain named' was rated at 4.6%. Within the higher-order category of leader role (34.9%) the contained lower-order category 'role conflicts' has the highest frequency with 23.3% followed by 'role ambiguities' with 9.3%. The higher-order category leader–member relations (32.6%) is dominated by the lower-order category 'balance own and others' expectations' with 25.6%. The highest frequency in the category organization (18.6%) has the lower-order category 'rules, laws and norms of the organization' with 16.3% and in the category workplace (7.0%) the lower-order category 'the task' corresponds exactly with the frequency of 7.0%.

Stressors–strain relations. The focus of the third research question was which strain factors could have a significant impact on leaders' power-related behaviour?

Table 3. Overview of the frequency of the higher-order and lower-order categories of stressors.

Code number	Category	Frequency (N = 43)	Percentage
2000	**Environment**	**1**	**2.3**
2010	National culture	1	2.3
2020	Rules, laws and norms of the society	0	0
2030	VUCA conditions	0	0
2040	Environmental changes	0	0
2100	**Organization**	**9**	**20.9**
2110	Organizational culture	2	4.7
2120	Intergroup conflict	1	2.3
2130	Corruption	0	
2140	Rules, laws and norms of the organization	6	14.0
2200	**Leader–member relations**	**10**	**23.3**
2210	Balance own and others' expectations, social norms and values	5	11.6
2220	Expectation of others	0	
2230	Changes in the expectations from different generations of employees (Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z)	5	11.6
2300	**Workplace**	**8**	**18.6**
2310	The task	5	11.6
2320	Workplace stress	1	2.3
2340	Chronic stressors such as adverse workplaces	2	4.7
2350	Long-term exposure to stressors	0	
2400	**Leader role**	**15**	**34.9**
2410	Role conflicts	2	4.7
2420	Overtaxed by the demands of their leadership role	4	9.3
2430	Leadership roles (different)	4	9.3
2440	Role ambiguities driven by partner-oriented teamwork, shared and distributed leadership, decentralization of decision-making and a lean or absent hierarchy of authority	5	11.6

Source: The author.

Figure 3 shows the frequency of particular relations between stressors and strain factors (lower-order categories) marked with the particular code number.

For example, the stressor with code 2010 leads to the strain factor 2410. Lines with numbers 2 or 3 represent how often this relation was named by the participants. For example, the relation between the stressor 2110 and the strain factor 2140 was named twice. The frequency shows how often the particular stressor or strain factor was identified by the participants.

Figure 3 shows that for the majority of participants, the sources of a particular strain factor are manifold. For example, the strain factor 2210 'balance own and others' expectations, social norms and values' was identified 11 times (highest score). Its sources are based in the higher-order categories of 'leader–member relations', 'workplace' and mainly in the 'leader role' category. Also, the second highest scored category, 2410 'role conflicts', has multiple sources such as 'environment', 'organization', 'leader–member relations', 'workplace' and 'leader role'. The sources of the lower-order category of strain 'rules, laws and norms of the organization' based on rank 3 of frequency are the stressor categories

Table 4. Examples of data coding for each lower-order category of stressors (each example is from a different data record).

Code number	Category	Example
2010	National culture	I have been working abroad for some months now in an environment with cultural differences in the approach or implementation of a change in organization that I, as a leader, should support and make successful.
2110	Organizational culture	Volatile business priorities; – mismatch: we talk about flat hierarchies but do not live it.
2120	Intergroup conflict	Group influence on decentralized decisions; Agile approaches are announced without knowing the necessary framework conditions or accepting the note of change (loss of power)
2140	Rules, laws and norms of the organization	Inconsistent requirements of the company management; Dealing with suggestions for improvement and constructive criticism
2210	Balance own and others' expectations, social norms and values	Strengthen employees' own motivation; – encourage employees to 'think aloud'; – mood in the team (like an old couple, since almost no fluctuation and no fresh wind)
2230	Changes in the expectations from different generations of employees (Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z)	Decentralized leadership; Take Generation Y with you and motivate you to achieve above-average performance and consistency
2310	The task	Balance between routine and new tasks
2320	Workplace stress	Succession planning for vacancies in the near future.; releasing retracted / rehearsed behaviour.; People who do not listen to each other and do not approach each other.; Dealing with or rejecting the high number of narcissistic people that exist in the leadership environment.
2340	Chronic stressors such as adverse workplaces	High work density in daily business with frequent interruptions and in addition several projects (in 2018 alone: complete software conversion, outsourcing warehouse and internal restructuring with redundancies). Transfer of business will follow around the middle of 2019. To stabilize and motivate my team against this background and to fulfil the requirements is a real challenge and costs a lot of energy.
2410	Role conflicts	The philosophy of the house is very difficult to reconcile with my values. In the course of mergers the cost reduction is in the foreground, which demotivates people. Made mistakes that the second management level has to bear.
2420	Overtaxed by the demands of their leadership role	That each leader at all costs tries to make agile and fast decisions but has no idea what these should be and has little or no support from equally unsuspecting superiors.

Table 4. Continued.

Code number	Category	Example
2430	Leadership roles (different)	To take all different roles and responsibilities in the matrix organization with further problems such as misaligned goals, conflicting loyalties and delayed decisions as well as dealing with a team of 10 team members from 10 countries
2440	Role ambiguities driven by partner-oriented teamwork, shared and distributed leadership, decentralization of decision-making, and a lean or absent hierarchy of authority	Awareness of the need to change leadership; Ability to be ambidextrous; Let go of power; Giving responsibility to teams; Trust in teams

Source: The author.

Table 5. Overview of the frequency of the higher-order and lower-order categories of strain.

Code number	Category	Frequency N = 43	Percentage
2000	**Environment**	**1**	**2.3**
2010	National culture		
2020	Rules, laws and norms of the society		
2030	VUCA conditions		
2040	Environmental changes	1	2.3
2100	**Organization**	**8**	**18.6**
2110	Organizational culture	1	2.3
2120	Intergroup conflict		
2130	Corruption		
2140	Rules, laws and norms of the organization	7	16.3
2200	**Leader–member relations**	**14**	**32.6**
2210	Balance own and others' expectations, social norms and values	11	25.6
2220	Expectation of others		
2230	Changes in the expectations from different generations of employees (Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z)	3	7.0
2300	**Workplace**	**3**	**7.0**
2310	The task	3	7.0
2320	Workplace stress		
2340	Chronic stressors such adverse workplaces		
2350	Long-term exposure to stressors		
2400	**Leader role**	**15**	**34.9**
2410	Role conflicts	10	23.3
2420	Overtaxed by the demands of their leadership role	1	2.3
2430	Leadership roles	4	9.3
2440	Role ambiguities driven by partner-oriented teamwork, shared and distributed leadership, decentralization of decision-making and a lean or absent hierarchy of authority		
n.n.	No strain named	2	4.6

Source: The author.

Table 6. Examples of data coding for each lower-order category of strain factors (each example is from a different data record).

Code number	Code	Example
2040	Environmental changes	The further (!) weakening of the industrial location, Germany in international comparison; – Overburdening current executives with new demands on your learned (and often proven) expertise; – Limiting and reducing a company to the capabilities of the current; management; => ergo: strong management overload leads to strategic vision loss and reduced risk taking
2110	Organizational culture	That is covered with VUCA, AGILE, . . . a cover over of the core of a problem of inability to take the responsibility for people and as an enabler to support his staff
2140	Rules, laws and norms of the organization	As a leader, I cannot make decisions myself; therefore not sustainable! Today's statements will be revised tomorrow
2210	Balance own and others' expectations, social norms and values	Power struggles with employees, factual questions are held at a personal level, individuals have a negative impact on the mood in the team, 'we've always done it this way so why should I do it differently now?'
2230	Changes in the expectations from different generations of employees (Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z)	It does not burden me that much anymore, because for two years I have begun to accept that today's generation is aiming more for life and leisure!
2310	The task	Time Issue – for a variety of reasons, the other assignments always have priority, little or no time to prepare for team meetings (employees have this time)
2410	Role conflicts	Stand between team and management. It is often difficult to complete this function.
2420	Overtaxed by the demands of their leadership role	Complexity increase leads to increased 'fatigue' in executives
2430	Leadership roles	Subject matter regarding the uncertainty of the jobs is comprehensible; – to stay authentic

Source: The author.

'organization', 'workplace' and 'leader role'. Hence, as indicated in Figure 3, the category of the stressors corresponds with the category of strain factor in 12 out of 43 data records (27.9%). This suggests that the source of stress leads to the same source of strain.

Discussion

The following sections present the results and discussions of the findings regarding the three research questions (RQ1–RQ3).

RQ1: What stressors do leaders perceive in power-related situations?

The results of this study show that leaders perceive social aspects such as the leader role and leader–member relations as well as contextual aspects such as the organization, the
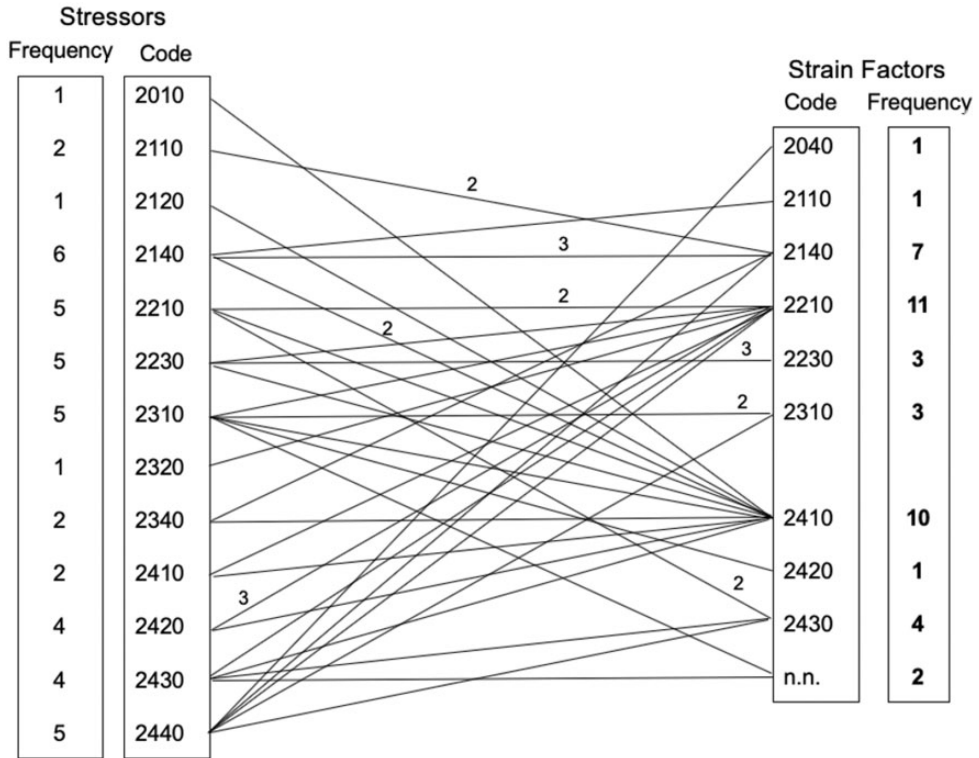
Figure 3. Identified stress–strain relations and their frequency based on gathered data.

workplace and the environment as stressors in power-related situations. In the following section the stressors are presented in their rank of frequency.

Leader role

The stressor identified with the highest frequency was 'leader role'. Role conflicts can be caused by different aspects such as role ambiguities, different leader roles and being over-taxed by the demand of leader roles, intrapersonal conflicts and feelings of unmet expectations. The exercise of power is therefore dependent on leadership roles, a leader's perceptions of her/his levels of control relative to others, and from power as a negotiation of a shared reality between leaders and others. It can be argued that the stressor, 'leader role' is a constitutional source of power-related leadership behaviour and that it can influence the positive or negative usage of power and affect its impact and consequences.

Leader–member relations

The second most important stressor related to the leader role in a social context is 'leader–member relations'. This mainly consists of a leader's own expectations and the expectation of others, especially when there are changes in the expectations from different generations of employees such as Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z. The new work and agile concepts in the modern business world often cause leader role ambiguities between classical hierarchical and modern

leadership models. Consequently, leading takes place within continuous tension regarding expected goals, ways to cooperate with employees, new perspectives of followers and the requirement to balance her/his own and others' expectations, social norms and values. This can lead to feelings of being overtaxed by the demands of the new leader role, and being overtaxed by the unmet expectations of followers with an increasing risk of burnout.

Organization

The stressor, 'organization' mainly represented by its culture, values and rules, was ranked as the third most important stressor. The organization as a social system builds the frame of organizational power determined by its procedures and policies. Leaders act within limited contexts that are structured by rules, laws, norms and social boundaries given by the organization. This limits what leaders can do and what they can be.

Workplace

In fourth place of the ranked stressors is 'workplace' which is mainly determined by the leaders' task and the perceived work stress by the leader doing her/his job and other job-related chronic stress factors. Changes in the workplace and the increasing flexibility of work influence the power-based behavioural pattern of leaders. This is driven by quantitative work overload, pressure to succeed, time pressure, constant availability at the workplace and role conflicts associated with decreasing job security or reduced social support.

Environment

The lowest ranking was the stressor, 'environment', including aspects of national culture, rules and laws of the society, VUCA conditions and environmental changes. Nevertheless, the environmental stressors are related to other higher-order stressors, such as workplace. These also influence the use of power e.g. corruption depending on national culture. Environmental changes can affect the resources available to a leader as potential facilitators and can therefore influence the power of a leader.

RQ2: What strain factors do leaders perceive in power-related situations?

The study findings show that the leaders' greatest concerns regarding the articulated stressors and what they are worrying about can be categorized with the same code scheme. The leaders mainly used factual descriptions of the perceived situations and their cognition of them to express their feeling of strain as the immediate impact of the particular stressor. For example, one participant described her/his strain perception of the category, 'balance own and others' expectations' with '. . . build a sense of togetherness, and commitment to the projects' in contrast to the condition '. . . that the team member sees himself less and less belonging to the team'.

Emotional states caused by strain were also articulated. For example, one participant suffers from role conflict expressed as follows: '. . . my growing distance to the company. I can identify myself less and less with the company. I always enjoyed my job; but now I often ask myself the question of meaning. . . . I feel I have to protect myself . . . .' Another participant describes change in expectations from different generations of employees: 'It does not burden me that much anymore, because for two years I have begun to accept

that today's generation is aiming more for life and leisure!' Such emotional statements can be interpreted as resignation or as a negative form of resistance. Other emotional statements such as 'I cannot make any decisions as a leader myself; not sustainable! Today's statements will be revised tomorrow', can also be interpreted as a form of resistance from the leader without a given formal power by authority. In particular, statements such as '...I feel I have to protect myself...' or '...I do not live up to my own expectations ...that I allow myself to be squeezed (?) between the many different requirements' or 'Where do I best use my energy?' can be interpreted as strategies to maintain, develop and protect their resources in this specific context with the aim of owning their goal achievement. One participant expressed the challenge of 'power struggles with employees' with the effect that '...(particular) individuals have a negative impact on the mood in the team' and these individuals may resist by asking '...we've always done it this way, why should I do it differently now?'

Other leaders suffer from role conflicts and see themselves in a 'sandwich position'. For example, '...I stand between the team and CEO. It is often difficult to complete this function'. Others feel limited in their agency and identify their own '...limited creative freedom' or they perceive inner tension by unmet expectations '...not being able to meet the different demands of the employee'. or the feeling of loss of resources.

Besides these emotional expressions of strain, other participants acknowledged feelings of strain determined by the environment, such as '...the weakening of the German industrial location in international comparison leads to overburdening of current executives with new demands and a strong management overload'. Others referred to organizational aspects in a way that the implementation of '...agile concepts covers the blindness regarding the inability of solving current problems'.

The participants' expressions of strain are multifaceted and cover a wide range of the themes discussed in this study. Nevertheless, the categorization shows that strain regarding the leader role has the highest frequency, followed by leader–member relations, organization and workplace. However, all these identified strain factors can be related to power in the context of leadership.

Summary regarding research questions 1 and 2

Regarding research questions 1 and 2, the leader role has the highest frequency, followed by leader–member relations, organization and workplace. Leaders perceive the leader role and leader–member relations as the most important stressors and strain factors in power-related situations. The results of this study give rise to the assumption that these stressors and strain factors are resource passageways which can create, maintain or limit the development of power resources. This is because leaders' power resources exist in a specific set of social conditions that either foster or block the creation or application of power resources. Specific conditions can influence the positive or negative application of power resources such as 'power with' or 'power-over'. Arguably, the leader role and leader–member relations foster or limit power resource development by influencing the gain or loss of power resources.

RQ3: Which strain factors could have a significant impact on leaders' power-related behaviour?

Table 7 represents the frequencies of stressors and strain factors regarding the selected higher-order category. This finding suggests that the frequency of the stressor categories

Table 7. Overview of frequencies of stressors and strain factors regarding the higher-order category.

Code	Higher-order category	Frequency of stressors	Frequency of strain (%)
2000	Environment	2.3%	2.3
2100	Organization	20.9%	18.6
2200	Leader–member relations	23.3%	32.6
2300	Workplace	18.6%	7.0
2400	Leader role	34.9%	34.9
	(n.b. no strain named)	0	4.6

Source: The author.

'organization' and 'workplace' are less than the same strain categories. It could be interpreted that these stressors lead to other forms of strain such as 'leader–member relations' and 'leader role'. The category 'leader role' has the same frequency as a stressor and as a strain factor, but the sources are different. The stressor 'leader role' influences other strain factors and the strain factor 'leader role' was influenced by other stressors (see Figure 3).

The frequency of the strain factor regarding the category of 'leader–member relation' with 32.6% is higher than the frequency of the same stressor category with 23.3%. The result indicates that strain related to 'balance own and others' expectations, social norms and values' (code: 2210) and 'role conflicts' (code: 2410) are more often recognized by leaders than other strain categories. The findings of this study show that contextual stressors such as organization and workplace can lead to social aspects of strain in particular leader–member relations and leader role (see Table 7). Therefore, it could be argued that particular power-related behaviour caused by strain is not only a psychological problem regarding the leader role or a social issue of leader–member relations. It is also influenced by the context and conditions in which leaders find themselves and by the expectations that surround the leader role.

Theoretical implications

The central contribution of this study is the identification of the strain factors, especially the leader role and leader–member relations as a resource passageway that can influence power-related behaviour. The study findings show that balancing own and others' expectations, social norms and values, changes in the expectations from different generations of employees (Gen X, Gen Y or Gen Z), role conflicts, being overtaxed by the demands of leader role, and the leadership role itself can reinforce leaders' strain in power-related situations. It can be argued that leaders facing such demands suffer from strain by a feeling of being overtaxed which could have significant impact on their power-related behaviour. The study shows how context and conditions, including all the identified stressors, produce strain. The strain factors with the highest frequency are the leader role and leader–member relations. Based on these findings, it can therefore be argued that context and conditions matter.

Practical implications

The findings of this study inform leaders that the better they can deal with role demands and expectations regarding their leader role, the better they can avoid role conflicts. This study

recommends that specific leadership development programmes should focus on recognition of stress–strain relations within power-related situations, leaders' self-reflexion on their own power-related behavioural patterns and the ability to clarify role expectations and deal with role conflicts. This can increase leaders' ability to manage their agile and ambidextrous leader roles and to adapt themselves to specific situations.

Leaders should actively invest in clarifying role demands and conflict management to prevent resource loss and to avoid a negative spiral effect of increasing loss. The worst-case scenario is that, in order to protect themselves, leaders may use negative power-related behaviour driven by control, coercion, self-interest, dominance, punishment, corruption and force.

Limitations and future research

The following limitations of this study warrant attention and future research. The data and results regarding the applied leaders' self-reports refer to a certain point in time rather than multi-rated and longitudinal data sets.

The specific context of the study, the applied method and sample size addresses the boundaries and the possible limitations of transferability, because the data were only gathered from a small sample size of business leaders in Germany. The more structured traditional and hierarchical German culture might have an influence on the gathered data from the participants. This may limit the transferability of the results to other cultures and countries.

The application of a survey based on the self-administered structured interview question-naire meant the sample size of the study was small. Low participant recruitment might have influenced this study because, out of 93 participants, only 43 completed the questionnaire and this final sample size did not allow a statistical analysis of the data. A quantitative content analysis was used within a rigorous research approach, but this is more often sub-jective and risks various biases regarding reliability.

This study provides a new perspective on the influence of stressors and strain factors on the power-related behavioural patterns of leaders. However, these assumptions might be limited by its subjectivity and situational novelty. Any future study regarding this topic should use a critical leadership perspective with a longitudinal approach. This should aim to collect data regarding the same phenomena at different times as well as integrating various data sources, e.g. assessment from followers, peers and other stakeholders. Further research should also move from a person-centred approach to a leader-follower exchange or organizational perspective. This could explore how leaders can support their followers or the organization dealing with stressors and strain factors within power relations.

Conclusion

There are increasing risks that contextual and conditional demands can overwhelm leaders with the effect that they might use destructive leadership behaviour or negative forms of power. However, this issue has received little research attention so far. The results of this study show that the strain factor of leader role and leader–member relations are resource passageways which can influence leaders' power-related behaviour. Strain emerges from the interrelation of a particular context and conditions with specific limitations of the leader

within power-related situations. So, context and conditions matter regarding the application of power.

These research findings highlight the importance of clarifying demands and expectations to prevent resource loss and to avoid the consequence that leaders apply negative power-related behaviour. It also reveals the necessity to improve leader role understanding regarding the new demands of being more flexible and ambidextrous.

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