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DOI
10.1037/xap0000502

Publication date
2024

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Journal of experimental psychology. Applied

Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied

ISSN: 1076-898X

2024, Vol. 30, No. 2, 344–358
https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000502

Better to Bend Than to Break? Effects of Rule Behavior on Dominance, Prestige, and Leadership Granting

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How people handle rules can influence their social standing in the eyes of others, including their appeal as leaders. It stands to reason that people prefer to grant leadership to individuals who follow rather than break the rules. However, preferences for rule abiders are less evident than one might expect. To enhance understanding of people's responses to (counter)normative behavior, we (a) introduce the concept of rule *bending*—behavior that infringes a rule without technically breaking it—and (b) draw on the dominance/prestige framework of social rank to illuminate the underlying processes that drive responses to such behavior. In two experiments (Study 1: $N = 149$; Study 2: $N = 480$, preregistered), we show that rule breaking (compared to rule abiding) signals relatively high dominance and low prestige, which undermine leadership granting to rule breakers. We further found that rule benders are seen as relatively high on both prestige and dominance, which renders them more attractive as leaders than rule breakers. Finally, we show that the attractiveness of nonabiders as leaders increases under competition when their apparent dominance becomes an asset. We discuss how rule bending relates to rule abiding and rule breaking and consider implications for understanding and managing rule-bending behavior.

Public Significance Statement
This study introduces the idea that those who bend rules—that is, find a way around a rule without technically breaking it—are more appealing as leaders than those who break rules. We demonstrate that people who bend rules are seen as both dominant and prestigious, which makes them attractive as leaders in both cooperative and competitive settings.

Keywords: rule bending, rule breaking, dominance, prestige, leadership granting

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000502.supp

> Anonymous banker to Nout Wellink, former President of DNB (the Dutch central bank): "So you invented this nice new regulation, but within half a year I will have come up with something that simply gets around it"
>
> —(Yuen & Kosters, 2018, 00:34:00)

Rules and regulations play a pivotal role in creating and maintaining well-functioning societies (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Morris et al., 2015). However, people differ in how they deal with rules and regulations, which in turn affects the social judgments and behavioral reactions of others. Although abiding by the rules is often seen as preferable and associated with positive responses (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Krupka & Weber, 2009), clearly people do not always follow the rules. From not wearing a mask indoors when required or entering public transport without a ticket to doping in a sports competition and using company secrets for insider trading, rule violations are widespread (Van Kleef et al., 2015). Some anecdotal evidence suggests that rule breakers may achieve greater success than people who follow the rules (Piven &

This article was published Online First December 18, 2023.
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This article was part of the doctoral dissertation of Florian Wanders. Florian Wanders is currently working at Booking. The authors thank Sietse Wernik for assistance with the data collection for Study 1. Study 2 was preregistered under https://osf.io/8tpsu/?view_only=ba67df586466464d9fac345f78e347ec. Full original materials, including all measures, can be found in the additional online material, and data and analysis code are available on open science framework at https://osf.io/sdruz/?view_only=c26684e48a7f41ee9689ce334ff2e732.

Astrid C. Homan played a lead role in supervision and writing–review and editing, a supporting role in investigation, project administration, and visualization, and an equal role in conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, validation, and writing–original draft. Florian Wanders played a lead role in data curation and investigation and an equal role in conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, validation, visualization, and writing–original draft. Annelies E. M. van Vianen played a supporting role in conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing and an equal role in supervision. Gerben A. van Kleef played a supporting role in formal analysis and investigation and an equal role in conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing.

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Cloward, 2003). Indeed, advice that people should break rules to emerge as leaders abounds (BBC Capital, 2015). Yet, as law suits against Facebook regarding Cambridge Analytics (Bowcott & Hern, 2018) and public outrage about former U.K. prime minister Boris Johnson's illegal parties during the COVID pandemic show, rule breaking may also backfire. Indeed, empirical research on the social consequences of rule breaking indicates that it can help or hinder rule breakers' advancement to higher ranks (e.g., Stamkou, Van Kleef, Homan, Gelfand, et al., 2019). Thus, while rule breaking can yield benefits (i.e., rising to higher hierarchical positions, being admired) under certain conditions (e.g., Dahling et al., 2012; Van Kleef et al., 2012), it also carries significant risks (i.e., encountering anger, being punished; for a review, see Van Kleef et al., 2015). To shed light on these divergent observations, we examine how the different ways in which people (actors) interact with rules influence others' (observers') perceptions of their dominance and prestige and whether and how these perceptions shape the tendency to grant actors leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In doing so, we incorporate a previously overlooked approach to handling rules by investigating reactions to actors who circumvent (rather than break) rules. Specifically, we investigate the hierarchical consequences of rule *bending* and compare these to rule abidance and rule breaking.

In exploring how rule behavior influences people's social standing, previous research has primarily compared responses to rule breakers versus rule abiders (Ghosh & Shum, 2019; Van Kleef et al., 2019). Although this research has contributed to a better understanding of the hierarchical consequences of rule abidance or breaking, it did not capture the full breadth of rule-related behaviors people may exhibit. In particular, rather than blatantly breaking the rules or blindly following them, people can *bend* the rules (cf. Kirke, 2010), that is, they can bypass rules without technically breaking them. Rule benders exploit a loophole in the way a rule is formulated. For example, when Tesla was not yet authorized to sell electric cars, chief executive officer Elon Musk decided to sell Tesla memberships that happened to cost as much as a Tesla and included a free electric car (Vance, 2015). Examples of rule bending abound from dubious insurance claims to tax evasion by exploiting loopholes in the tax law and questionable investments such as subprime loans (Ewing, 2018; Flannigan, 2007; Walker, 2009).

Despite the prevalence of rule bending, surprisingly little is known about its consequences for rule benders' positions in social hierarchies. In the current research, we build on the dominance/prestige framework of social rank (Cheng et al., 2013) to develop the argument that rule abiders, breakers, and benders signal different levels of dominance and prestige, which in turn makes them more or less likely to be granted leadership. We will develop the hypothesis that people who abide by rules are seen as relatively low on dominance (given that they obey rules rather than show agentic, risky behavior; Van Kleef et al., 2021) but high on prestige (by acting like role models). Conversely, we propose that people who break rules are perceived as relatively high on dominance (through their assertive behavior) but low on prestige (as they do not act like role models). Furthermore, we will argue that, unlike rule abiders and rule breakers, people who bend rules are seen as relatively high on both dominance and prestige, given that they found a way to show assertiveness, without harming the collective.

Dominance and Prestige as Distinct Routes to Leadership

The dominance/prestige framework posits that social rank can be obtained via two independent routes: dominance and prestige (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Dominance refers to behaviors that rely on force or threat of force to obtain social rank (Cheng et al., 2010). For example, in their search for a leader, members of a newly formed team might concede to the loudest person who is most assertive (C. Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Prestige refers to social rank freely granted to individuals who deserve it (Cheng et al., 2010). For example, when members of a newly formed team deliberate who should lead the team, they might grant leadership to the person with the most task-relevant experience (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

Dominance and prestige are distinct strategies for obtaining social rank (Halevy et al., 2012; Maner, 2017). Dominance evolved as a strategy to deal with threats, both from within the group and from outside of the group (Cheng et al., 2013; Gordon et al., 2014; Halevy et al., 2012; Lukaszewski et al., 2016). Social rank obtained by dominance is often associated with fear and intimidation in those who defer to the force and aggression displayed (Cheng, 2020). Through their assertive behavior, dominant individuals signal that they should not be challenged. Ranking based on dominance is thus enforced rather than freely granted (Cheng, 2020). However, in settings where groups compete, dominant individuals can unite collective action toward a common goal that represents the interests of the entire group (Laustsen & Petersen, 2015; Maner & Mead, 2010). Moreover, the assertiveness of dominant individuals can provide protection against outside threats, ranging from economic uncertainty (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017) to hostile outgroups (Halevy et al., 2012; Laustsen & Petersen, 2015; Lukaszewski et al., 2016; Van Kleef et al., 2021). Thus, dominant individuals can obtain social rank through force and intimidation (Cheng et al., 2010, 2013), making them appear effective and competent (C. Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), especially in competitive settings (Spisak et al., 2012). Although some level of dominance may be associated with rank and leadership (Hare et al., 1997; Offermann & Coats, 2018), voluntary leadership granting requires more than installing fear and intimidation in potential followers, especially in nonthreatening settings—it requires prestige.

Prestige evolved as a strategy to effectively transmit knowledge and skills within a group. As human groups became increasingly complex, individuals were searching for ways to model themselves after group members who were successful in reaching the goals of the group in order to learn from them. By displaying skills and knowledge valued by the group, individuals can obtain the admiration of other group members, and, ultimately, attain social rank (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Maner, 2017). Groups who grant leadership to prestigious individuals ensure that knowledge and skills are utilized effectively (Dávid-Barrett & Dunbar, 2012). This evolutionary mechanism explains why, also today, people are likely to grant leadership to individuals who appear prestigious (Halevy et al., 2012).

Behavioral Responses to Rules as Cues of Dominance Versus Prestige

Whereas information about prestige and dominance determines whether people will grant someone leadership, such information

may not always be directly available. Instead, people often infer how prestigious and dominant an individual is based on available cues in the situation. Here, we put forward a theoretical argument about how individuals' handling of rules provides such cues of their dominance and prestige. We first focus on the previous finding that rule breakers are generally granted less leadership than rule abiders (Stamkou et al., 2016; Stamkou, Van Kleef, & Homan, 2019) and then extend this finding by arguing that perceptions of dominance and prestige are the underlying mechanisms. Then, we introduce the notion of rule bending and compare this behavior to rule abiding and rule breaking to derive predictions about rule bending as a signal of prestige and dominance that elicits leadership granting.

Rule Breakers Signal Higher Dominance but Lower Prestige Compared to Rule Abiders

We argue that—compared to people who abide by rules—rule breakers signal dominance through their disregard for the rules and for the consequences that may result from breaking the rules. First, people who break rules show that they put their own interests ahead of those of the collective (Abrams et al., 2013). Such aggressive prioritization of one's own agenda is characteristic of dominance (Cheng et al., 2010; Keltner et al., 2008). Second, people who break the rules demonstrate that they do not care about the sanctions that can result from breaking rules (Bellezza et al., 2014; Wanders et al., 2021). From a costly-signaling perspective (Bird & Smith, 2005; Zahavi, 1995), only individuals dominant enough to withstand possible backlash would dare to engage in such reckless behavior. Third, individuals who are prone to take risks are perceived as more dominant than those who avoid risks (van Kleef et al., 2021). To the degree that breaking rules is risky as it can backfire, breaking rules may act as a signal of dominance.

Hypothesis 1: Rule breakers are perceived as more dominant than rule abiders.

Whereas rule breakers thus signal high dominance, we propose that they signal low prestige compared to rule abiders. First, rule breakers demonstrate a disregard for the concerns of the community by breaking rules that ensure orderly coexistence. Such behavior contrasts with prestige, which highlights deserving individuals within a community (for exceptions in which rule breakers care about their social environment, see e.g., Dahling et al., 2012; Morrison, 2006; Packer & Chasteen, 2010; Roulet, 2019; Van Kleef et al., 2012). Second, rule breakers are typically met with sanctions, for instance, social exclusion (Fritsche et al., 2009) or formal punishment (Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997), even if they have prosocial motives (Dahling et al., 2012). Rule breakers are therefore more likely to be negative role models whose behaviors are best not adopted, as opposed to positive role models from whom others can learn (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In contrast, rule abiders uphold cooperation and social order and are exemplars whose behavior invites imitation. Therefore, compared with rule abiders, rule breakers are less likely to be seen as prestigious.

Hypothesis 2: Rule breakers are perceived as less prestigious than rule abiders.

Even though both dominance and prestige are paths to rank and influence, displaying dominance without prestige is unlikely to result in voluntary leadership granting (C. Anderson et al., 2015). Dominant individuals may acquire influence through force and intimidation, but their behavior also evokes resistance (Cheng, 2020; Ramdass & Hogg, 2019). Indeed, previous research demonstrated that—in the absence of prestige—dominance tends not to invite the voluntary granting of leadership (C. Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Chen et al., 2014). The dominance-based abilities to protect fellow group members from outside threats (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017), to punish injustice (Gordon et al., 2014), or to unite diverging opinions into collective action toward a common goal (Laustsen & Petersen, 2015) may only be appealing when people believe that these abilities will be used for the good of the group, not to subjugate them by force. Therefore, we propose that rule breakers, who signal relatively high dominance and low prestige, are at a disadvantage compared to rule abiders when it comes to being granted leadership. Although rule abiders appear less dominant, they demonstrate relatively higher levels of prestige compared to rule breakers, which may generally render them more attractive as leaders. These considerations lead to the following prediction:

Hypothesis 3: Rule breakers are granted less leadership than rule abiders (H3a) because rule breakers appear less prestigious than rule abiders (H3b).

Rule Benders Signal Relatively High Dominance and Prestige

We argue that people who bend rules display a combination of dominance and prestige. On the one hand, rule bending resembles rule breaking in that both rule breakers and rule benders demonstrate disregard for what the rule stands for, making both seem relatively dominant. Rule benders impose their own interpretation of the rules and rule breakers prioritize their own agenda over the rules that bind others. We therefore hypothesize that, just like rule breakers, rule benders appear more dominant than rule abiders.

Hypothesis 4: Rule benders are perceived as more dominant than rule abiders.

On the other hand, rule bending is clearly distinct from rule breaking in the extent to which rule benders are likely to be considered role models (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). First, rule benders do not go so far as to violate the rules but rather try to circumvent them by stretching them to their advantage. Second, rule bending cannot be sanctioned because, technically, it does not involve breaking any rules. Rule breaking, in contrast, can be sanctioned, meaning that following a rule breaker is risky. Indeed, sanctioning has been found to be negatively associated with power perceptions—and therefore leadership potential—of those who break the rules (Wanders et al., 2021). For these reasons, rule benders can be seen as better role models than rule breakers and therefore should be more likely to amass prestige.

Hypothesis 5: Rule benders are perceived as more prestigious than rule breakers.

To summarize, we propose that rule benders are perceived as relatively dominant (compared to rule abiders) and prestigious (compared to rule breakers). Given the importance of prestige for leadership granting (Cheng et al., 2013), we argue that rule benders are more likely to be granted leadership than rule breakers. With regard to the comparison between rule bending and rule abiding, we expect that rule abiders and rule benders experience similar levels of prestige, but rule abiders are perceived as less dominant than rule benders. We argue that dominance by itself is unlikely to lead to the voluntary granting of leadership (Cheng, 2020). However, the combination of dominance and prestige can mitigate concerns that dominance will be used in a selfish way and thereby fuel the expectation that the potential benefits of dominance (Gordon et al., 2014; Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017; Laustsen & Petersen, 2015) will be used for the benefit of the group. As such, we propose that rule benders are granted more leadership than rule abiders because they are seen as both dominant and prestigious.

> *Hypothesis 6:* Rule benders are granted more leadership than rule breakers and rule abiders (H6a) because they appear more dominant than rule abiders (H6b) and appear more prestigious than rule breakers (H6c).

Using the well-established dominance/prestige framework, we thus argue for a mediational model (Cheng, 2020; Maner & Case, 2016), in which rule abidance, breaking, and bending influence perceptions of dominance and prestige, which in turn are associated with different levels of leadership granting. Our predictions, summarized in Table 1, were tested in two studies. In Study 1, we measured leadership granting by letting participants assign leader or follower tasks to a target. In Study 2, we varied the context in which leadership is granted, because leaders typically face a diversity of situations (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Some situations may call for relatively more dominance (i.e., competitive situations) and others for relatively more prestige (i.e., cooperative situations; e.g., De Dreu et al., 2012; Spisak et al., 2012; Van Kleef et al., 2021). As rule benders demonstrate both prestige and dominance, we expected them to appear suitable as leader candidates across situations, whereas rule abiders might be seen as relatively more suitable in cooperative situations and rule breakers as relatively more suitable in more competitive situations.

Transparency and Openness and Sample Justification

All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and R (R Core Team, 2018). We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study (Simmons et al., 2012). Sample size for both studies was determined before any data analysis such that we aimed for 50 participants per condition in Study 1 (which had a relatively homogeneous sample) and 150 participants per condition in Study 2 (which had a relatively heterogeneous sample). These sample sizes are in line with common recommendations (S. F. Anderson et al., 2017; Brysbaert, 2019). The sample of Study 1 was relatively homogeneous as these data were collected by a master-thesis student, who invited mostly fellow students to participate in the study. We therefore decided to increase the diversity of our sample using an online crowdsource platform in Study 2 (requesting a representative sample of U.S. participants; Porter et al., 2019). Full original materials, including all measures, can be found in the additional online material, and data and analysis code are available on open science framework at https://osf.io/sdruz/?view_only=c26684e48a7f41ee9689ce334ff2e732. Both studies were approved by the local institutional review board (under case file numbers 2018-WOP-9162 and 2018-WOP-9405). Because we preregistered directional one-tailed testing for Study 2, we consistently report one-tailed test statistics for directional hypotheses and two-tailed test statistics for all other analyses.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Design

We employed a three-cell between-subjects design (abide vs. break vs. bend rules) and collected data in the Netherlands from 158 participants, of which 149 participants were retained (70 women, 77 men, 2 nonbinary, M_{age} = 26.82, range: 17–71).[1] We tested our hypotheses by means of planned comparisons between pairs of conditions corresponding with the respective hypotheses (detailed below). Sensitivity analyses for the planned contrast analyses (G*Power; Faul et al., 2007; α level .05) suggested we have a power of .80 to detect medium effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's $d = 0.52$, Cohen's $f = 0.26$, $R^2 = 0.06$). This study was not preregistered.

Manipulation

Participants read about a car company that was not allowed to sell cars without completing a large amount of administrative work but direly needed revenue. To keep the company going, the rule abider suggested to rely on crowdfunding, the rule breaker suggested selling cars anyways, and the rule bender suggested selling memberships that include a free car—this way, cars can find new owners while technically no cars are sold, so there is no need to keep records preventing the sale of cars (see the online Supplemental Part A, for the full Dutch text). Importantly, all three suggestions imply keeping the business in operation.

Procedure and Measures

Data for this study were collected online from mid May to mid June 2018 by an undergraduate student. The full survey took approximately 10 min and started with an informed consent form. Participants then indicated their gender and age. After reading about the car company, participants first indicated their willingness to grant leadership to James (the target of the scenario) and then the extent to which they perceived James as prestigious and as dominant. Thereafter, participants completed additional questions (reported in the online Supplemental; p. 4) including three questions measuring perceptions of creativity as a control variable (English items are on p. 8 in the online Supplemental) and an attention check.

Leadership Granting. Leadership granting was assessed with a behavioral task by asking participants to imagine that the car company was short on employees and that every employee needed to take up additional tasks. Participants were asked which four tasks they would like human resources to assign to James and were

[1] This excludes participants for whom only partial data was available. The results of Study 1 remained unchanged when including these partial responses.

Table 1
Hypothesized Effects of Rule Abidance, Rule Breaking, and Rule Bending on Prestige, Dominance, and Leadership Granting

Overview of hypotheses	Prestige (S1 and S2)	Dominance (S1 and S2)	Leadership Granting (S1)	Leadership granting	
				Cooperative (S2)	Competitive (S2)
Abide (0) versus break (1) [H1–3]	−	+	−		
Abide (0) versus bend (1) [H4, H6a, H7]		+	+		+
Break (0) versus bend (1) [H5, H6b, H8]	+		+	+	

Note. + and − signs denote the hypothesized direction of the effect, with + denoting relatively higher predicted scores for the focal condition (1) compared to the referent condition (0) and − denoting relatively lower predicted scores for the focal condition. Empty cells indicate the absence of a directional hypothesis. H = hypothesis.

informed that the remaining tasks would be completed by other employees in the company (Van Kleef et al., in press; De Pater et al., 2009; Visée, 2014). Participants could choose from six leader tasks (e.g., presenting the positive annual figures of the team to the other teams in the company) and six subordinate tasks (e.g., organizing catering for a staff party). More leadership tasks assigned to the protagonist indicates higher leadership granting.

Dominance and Prestige. Perceptions of dominance and prestige were assessed with two questionnaires (Cheng et al., 2010), containing eight items for dominance ($\alpha = .90$) and nine items for prestige ($\alpha = .92$). Example items for dominance are: "He is willing to use aggressive tactics to get his way" and "Others know it is better to let him have his way." Example items for prestige are: "Others respect and admire James" and "Others seek his advice on a variety of matters."

Manipulation Checks and Alternative Explanation. Rule breaking was measured with three items, assessing whether James followed the rules (reversed), broke the rules, and behaved appropriately in the eyes of authorities (reversed, $\alpha = .91$). Rule bending was also measured with three items, assessing whether James found a loophole in the regulations, found a way around the regulations, and circumvented regulations without breaking them ($\alpha = .92$).

To examine the possibility that rule bending might be seen as more creative than role abiding or breaking, we also included three items to measure perceptions of the creativity of James' behavior. Results for creativity perceptions are presented in the online Supplemental Part C. Controlling for creativity perceptions did not change the conclusions.

Attention Check. We included an attention check item among the other items, asking participants to check the middle response option (Meade & Craig, 2012). Participants who did not follow this instruction were excluded from the analyses. Of the 158 participants who completed the survey, nine failed the attention check (one participant in the abiding condition, five participants in the breaking condition, and three participants in the bending condition), resulting in a final N of 149.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables of interest are presented in Table 2. Before testing our hypotheses, we checked for homogeneity of variances across conditions for the manipulation checks and three dependent variables using the Bartlett test. We found that the assumption of equal variances was violated for the manipulation check for rule bending, $\chi^2 = 14.85$, $p = .001$. For the other constructs, there was no evidence of violation of homogeneity of variances, all $\chi^2 < 5.68$, all $p > .059$. We therefore assume unequal variances only when examining the post hoc tests for the bending manipulation check.

Manipulation Checks

Separate one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the manipulation checks revealed significant differences between the three conditions on perceptions of rule breaking, $F(2, 146) = 118.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .618$, and rule bending, $F(2, 146) = 50.28$, $p < .001$,

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between the Variables of Interest in Study 1

Variables of interest	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Sex	0.53 (0.50)	—								
2. Age	27.03 (10.87)	−.049	—							
3. Bending condition	NA	−.135	−.024	—						
4. Breaking condition	NA	.120	−.011	−.504**	—					
5. Bending manipulation check	3.78 (1.99)	.109	−.005	.605**	−.482**	—				
6. Breaking manipulation check	3.93 (1.99)	.067	−.047	−.106	.726**	−.296**	—			
7. Perceived dominance	4.22 (1.08)	.018	.003	.000	.523**	−.028	.683**	—		
8. Perceived prestige	4.43 (0.97)	.065	−.202*	.358**	−.598**	.483**	−.535**	−.453**	—	
9. Leadership granting	2.52 (1.30)	.091	−.142	.245**	−.239**	.470**	−.067	.176*	.312**	—

Note. $N = 149$ (except for gender where two nonbinary individuals were excluded from the current analyses). Sex: 0 = male, 1 = female; bending condition: 0 = abidance + breaking conditions, 1 = bending condition; breaking condition: 0 = abidance + bending conditions, 1 = breaking condition. NA = not applicable.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

$\eta_p^2 = .408$. Participants rated the rule breaker as more rule breaking ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.15$, 95% CI [5.531, .160]) than the rule bender ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.49$, 95% CI [3.175, 4.057], $t[146] = 8.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.68$), and the rule abider ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.07$, 95% CI [1.808, 2.424], $t[146] = 15.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.35$). Furthermore, participants rated the rule bender as more rule bending ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.08$, 95% CI [5.252, 5.893]) than the rule abider ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.93$, 95% CI [2.936, 4.043], $t[76.324] = 6.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.33$) and the rule breaker ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.48$, 95% CI [2.109, 2.916], $t[95.844] = 8.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.36$). Thus, the manipulations were successful.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 stated that rule breakers appear more dominant than rule abiders. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences between the three conditions on dominance perceptions, $F(2, 146) = 42.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .367$. Supporting Hypothesis 1, a planned contrast indicated that rule breakers were indeed seen as more dominant than rule abiders, $t(146) = 9.20$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [1.282, Infinite], $d = 1.815$. See Table 3 for means and standard deviations.

Hypothesis 2 stated that rule breakers appear less prestigious than rule abiders. A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between the three conditions on prestige perceptions, $F(2, 146) = 41.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .362$. Supporting Hypothesis 2, a planned contrast indicated that rule breakers were indeed seen as less prestigious than rule abiders, $t(146) = -7.31$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [-Inf, −0.873], $d = -1.442$.

Hypothesis 3 stated that rule breakers are granted less leadership than rule abiders (H3a) because rule breakers appear less prestigious than rule abiders (Hypothesis 3b). A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between the three conditions on leadership granting, $F(2, 146) = 6.19$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .078$. Providing some support for Hypothesis 3a, a planned contrast indicated that rule breakers were indeed granted less leadership than rule abiders, $t(146) = -1.69$, $p = .047$ (one-sided), 95% CI [-Inf, −0.008], $d = -0.333$.

A multiple mediation analysis with dominance and prestige as mediators of the effect of target behavior (rule breaking vs. rule abiding) on leadership granting supported the role of prestige in leadership granting, $B_{\text{indirect}} = -0.57$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI [-Inf, −0.344]. As predicted, rule breakers were seen as less prestigious than rule abiders, $B = -1.13$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(146) = -7.31$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [-Inf, −0.873], and reduced prestige perceptions resulted in reduced leadership granting, $B = 0.50$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(144) = 4.07$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.707, Inf]. Hypothesis 3b was therefore supported. Moreover, this analysis revealed a positive indirect effect via dominance, $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.95$, $SE = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.583, 1.405]—which indicated that rule breakers were seen as more dominant than rule abiders, $B = 1.56$, $SE = 0.17$, $t(146) = 9.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.227, 1.898], and greater perceptions of dominance resulted in increased leadership granting, $B = 0.61$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(144) = 5.41$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.385, 0.830]. However, as reported above, the net effect of rule breaking on leadership granting was negative.

Hypothesis 4 stated that rule benders appear more dominant than rule abiders. We already reported that the three conditions differed in terms of dominance perceptions. Supporting Hypothesis 4, a planned contrast indicated that rule benders were indeed seen as more dominant than rule abiders, $t(146) = 4.64$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.527, Inf], $d = 0.952$.

Hypothesis 5 stated that rule benders appear more prestigious than rule breakers. We already reported that the three conditions differed in terms of prestige perceptions. Supporting Hypothesis 5, a planned contrast indicated that rule benders were indeed seen as more prestigious than rule breakers, $t(146) = 8.20$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [1.029, Inf], $d = 1.646$.

Hypothesis 6 stated that rule benders are granted more leadership than rule breakers or rule abiders (Hypothesis 6a) because they appear more dominant than rule abiders (Hypothesis 6b) and more prestigious than rule breakers (Hypothesis 6c). We already reported significant differences in leadership granting between the three conditions. Supporting Hypothesis 6a, a planned contrast indicated that rule benders were indeed granted more leadership than either rule abiders, $t(146) = 1.82$, $p = .036$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.041, Inf], $d = 0.373$, or rule breakers, $t(146) = 3.52$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.471, Inf], $d = 0.706$.

As Table 4 shows, a multiple mediation analysis with bootstrapped confidence intervals supported the role of dominance for the comparison between rule breaking and rule bending and the role of prestige for the comparison between rule abiding and rule bending in leadership granting. In line with Hypothesis 6b, rule benders were seen as more dominant than rule abiders (see Hypothesis 4, for statistics) and increased dominance perceptions resulted in more leadership granting, $B = 0.61$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(144) = 5.41$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.422, Inf]. The exploratory comparison between the bending and abiding condition showed that prestige ratings did not mediate the effects on leadership granting. In line with H6c, rule benders were seen as more prestigious than rule breakers (see Hypothesis 5, for statistics), and increased prestige perceptions resulted in more leadership granting, $B = 0.50$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(144) = 4.07$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.299, Inf]. When exploring the role of dominance, the data showed that rule breaking was associated with higher dominance ratings than rule bending, and dominance was in turn positively associated with leadership granting. Even though the rule breaker was granted leadership due to greater perceived dominance, the significantly higher ratings of prestige for rule benders resulted in greater leadership granting for rule benders compared to rule breakers.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations per Condition in Study 1

Measure	Experimental condition		
	Abide ($n = 49$)	Bend ($n = 46$)	Break ($n = 54$)
Dominance	3.40_a (0.94)	4.22_b (0.76)	4.96_c (0.87)
Prestige	4.79_a (0.72)	4.95_a (0.70)	3.66_b (0.90)
Leadership granting	2.53_{ab} (1.34)	3.00_a (1.25)	2.11_b (1.19)

Note. Means (standard deviations). Dominance and prestige were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale, whereas participants could select between 0 and 4 leadership tasks for our measure of leadership granting. Means in the same row with a different subscript differ significantly from each other at $p < .05$.

Discussion

Study 1 provided first evidence for our prediction that rule benders are granted leadership more easily than rule breakers due to signaling prestige. Our evidence with regard to granting leadership

Table 4
Indirect Effects on Leadership Granting in Study 1 for the Comparison of Rule Benders With Rule Abiders and Rule Breakers

Predictor	Mediator	Hypothesis	Indirect effect on leadership granting
Abide (0) versus bend (1)	Dominance	H6b	$B = 0.50$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.286, Inf]
	Prestige	E	$B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [−0.047, 0.243]
Break (0) versus bend (1)	Dominance	E	$B = -0.45$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [−0.731, −0.225]
	Prestige	H6c	$B = 0.65$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.418, Inf]

Note. An E under the header "Hypothesis" indicates an exploratory finding that we discuss in the text. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; H = hypothesis; Inf = infinite.

to rule benders as compared to rule abiders is less straightforward. The difference in leadership granting between the bending and abiding conditions is very small and only significant using directional one-tailed testing. However, we do find some support for an increase in dominance being associated with greater leadership granting at similar levels of perceived prestige of rule benders and rule abiders. Interestingly, while rule breakers were judged as dominant and dominance mediated the relationship between rule breaking and leadership granting, the lack of prestige of rule breakers hindered their attainment of leadership. This finding suggests that it may not be high levels of dominance that keep rule breakers from attaining leadership but their lack of prestige. Such an interpretation further supports the idea that dominance and prestige are two viable routes to leadership (Cheng et al., 2013), which may be more or less influential depending on what the situation requires.

Study 2

Leaders typically face a diversity of situations (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), some of which may call for more prestige and others for more dominance. This could imply that rule breaking or rule abiding will be preferred in some situations but less so in others. However, given that rule bending seems to signal both dominance and prestige, rule benders may appear suitable as leader candidates across contexts. This is what we aim to test in Study 2 by varying the context within which leadership is granted.

We use an evolutionary perspective to identify which contexts call for prestige and dominance. Prestige evolved as a strategy to effectively transmit knowledge and skills within a group by endowing valuable role models with admiration and freely granted deference (Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng, 2020; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Prestige thus evolved in contexts of close cooperation in which it is possible to identify role models and learn from them. Given the importance of cooperation for prestige, cooperative contexts therefore likely call for prestigious leaders. Indeed, Halevy et al. (2012) found that for tasks that required cooperation with other group members, prestigious individuals emerged as leaders.

In contrast, dominance evolved as a strategy to subjugate others and resist competition for resources and mates through forceful conflict (Cheng et al., 2013). Threats in the form of dominance displays helped avert actual physical conflict (Cheng et al., 2013). Dominance thus promises protection from hostilities that arise in competitive contexts, which suggests that competitive contexts call for a dominant leader who is assertive enough to ward off any attack (Halevy et al., 2012; Laustsen & Petersen, 2015; Maner & Mead, 2010; Spisak et al., 2012; Van Kleef et al., 2021). Indeed, Halevy et al. (2012) found that in the context of tasks that involved competition with another group, dominant individuals emerged as leaders. Moreover, research on transgression credits (i.e., license to transgress) has shown that ingroup leaders who transgress against an outgroup are evaluated more positively (Abrams et al., 2013).

The differential importance of prestige and dominance has implications for the extent to which rule benders, compared to rule abiders and rule breakers, are granted leadership in competitive versus cooperative contexts. Cooperative contexts require prestige, which implies that rule benders should be preferred as leaders over rule breakers (who lack prestige). In contrast, competitive contexts require dominance, which implies that rule benders should be preferred as leaders over rule abiders (who lack dominance). These considerations result in the following preregistered hypotheses (summarized in Table 1).[2]

> *Hypothesis 7:* In competitive situations, rule benders are granted more leadership than rule abiders (H7a) because rule benders appear more dominant than rule abiders (H7b).

> *Hypothesis 8:* In cooperative situations, rule benders are granted more leadership than rule breakers (H8a) because rule benders appear more prestigious than rule breakers (H8b).

Method

To test these predictions, we employed a similar setup as in Study 1 but now asked participants to judge the suitability of the target in the scenario for a leadership position in various competitive and cooperative settings.

Participants and Design

We employed a three-cell between-subjects design (abide vs. break vs. bend rules), with a sample of 502 participants from TurkPrime (currently CloudResearch; 283 women, 218 men, 1 nonbinary, $M_{age} = 36.37$, range: 20–71; 207 participants had a bachelor's degree, 93 started a college or university but did not obtain a degree, 82 had a master's degree, 59 had a 2-year technical or associate's degree, 55 had a high school diploma, five obtained a doctoral degree, and one did not finish high school).[3] We tested our

[2] Study 2 was preregistered under https://osf.io/8tpsu/?view_only=ba67df586466464d9fac345f78e347ec. Note that analyses reported in the paper differ from the analyses that we preregistered. We report the originally planned (but less comprehensive) analyses in the Supplemental (Part D). Importantly, these different analyses do not result in different conclusions.

[3] This excludes participants for whom only partial data was available. The results of Study 2 remained unchanged when including these partial responses.

hypotheses by means of planned comparisons between pairs of conditions corresponding with the respective hypotheses (detailed below). Sensitivity analyses (G*Power; Faul et al., 2007; α level .05) suggested we have a power of .80 to detect small-to-medium effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's $d = 0.28$, Cohen's $f = 0.14$, $R^2 = 0.02$). This study was preregistered (see Footnote 2).

Manipulation

Participants read about an e-bike company called EverBikes that was not allowed to sell electric bicycles without completing a large amount of administrative work first but direly needed revenue. To keep the company going, the rule abider suggested to find sponsors, the rule breaker suggested to sell e-bikes anyways, and the rule bender suggested to sell memberships that included a free e-bike (see the online Supplemental Part B and Part C, for the full English text and the description of two pilot studies used to develop the manipulations).

Procedure and Measures

Data for this study were collected online in October 2018. The survey took approximately 10 min and started with an informed consent form. Participants then indicated their gender, age, and education level. After reading about the e-bike company, participants indicated in how far they judged Michael (the target of the scenario) as suitable for a leadership position in various competitive and cooperative settings as well as the extent to which they perceived him as prestigious and as dominant. The study ended with manipulation checks assessing rule breaking, rule bending, and (unlike in Study 1) rule abidance, three questions measuring perceptions of creativity as a control variable (results are reported in the online Supplemental; an attention check was embedded in the creativity questions) and a seriousness check (Aust et al., 2013). Full scales are reported in online Supplemental Part B.

Leadership Granting. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) they would endorse the protagonist as front runner of a political party, as captain of a sports team, as president of an association of homeowners, as chief executive officer of a large oil company, and as ambassador for an animal welfare organization. For each role, a competitive (α = .88) and a cooperative (α = .94) setting was presented (this scale was developed and validated by Van Kleef et al., 2021). For example, participants were asked "To what extent would you endorse [the protagonist] as front runner of a political party when compromises must be found with other parties to form a government?" and "To what extent would you endorse Michael as front runner of a political party in fierce debates with other parties?"

Prestige and Dominance. Perceptions of prestige (α = .87) and dominance (α = .95) were assessed with the same two questionnaires as in Study 1. These and the remaining scales had response anchors ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*).

Manipulation Checks. The present study included three sets of manipulation checks, assessing rule abidance, breaking, and bending. Each manipulation check contained eight items. Example items are for rule abidance (α = .97): "Michael's suggestion is to abide by rules in order to sell bikes"; for rule breaking (α = .97): "Michael's suggestion violates legal regulations"; and for rule bending (α = 90): "Michael's suggestion is to bend rules in order to sell bikes."

Attention and Diligence Check. As in Study 1, we included an attention check among the other items, asking participants to check the middle response option. Participants who did not follow this instruction were excluded from the analyses. Additionally, we excluded participants who indicated at the end of the study that they did not participate seriously (Aust et al., 2013; Meade & Craig, 2012). Both of these exclusion criteria were preregistered. Of the 502 participants who completed the survey, 17 failed the attention check (three participants in the abide condition, 11 participants in the breaking condition, and three participants in the bending condition) and five directly stated that they did not participate seriously (two in the abide condition, one in the breaking condition, and two in the bending condition), resulting in a final sample of $N =$ 480 (213 women, 266 men, 1 nonbinary; $M_{age} = 36.58$, range: 20–71; 200 participants had a bachelor's degree, 89 started a college or university but did not obtain a degree, 71 had a master's degree, 59 had a technical or associate's degree, 55 had a high school diploma, five obtained a doctoral degree, and one did not finish high school).

Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables of interest are presented in Table 5. Before testing our hypotheses, we checked for homogeneity of variances across conditions for the manipulation checks and four dependent variables using the Bartlett test. We found that for the manipulation check for rule abiding, $\chi^2 = 37.94$, $p < .001$, rule bending, $\chi^2 = 88.51$, $p < .001$, and rule breaking, $\chi^2 = 88.68$, $p < .001$, and for dominance, $\chi^2 = 28.87$, $p < .001$, leadership granting in the cooperative setting, $\chi^2 = 32.68$, $p < .001$, and leadership granting in the competitive setting, $\chi^2 = 17.97$, $p < .001$, variances were not equal across conditions. This assumption was not violated for prestige, $\chi^2 = 2.89$, $p = .236$. We therefore assume unequal variances when testing our specific contrast hypotheses for dominance and leadership granting in both settings and the post hoc tests for the manipulation checks.

Manipulation Checks

Three one-way ANOVAs on the manipulation checks revealed significant differences between the three conditions on perceived rule abiding, $F(2, 477) = 245.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .507$, rule bending, $F(2, 477) = 102.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.300$, and rule breaking, $F(2, 477) = 206.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .464$. Participants rated the rule abider as more rule abiding ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.05$, 95% CI [5.659, 5.982]) than the rule bender ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.40$, 95% CI [3.659, 4.096], $t[294.139] = 14.11$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.57$) and the rule breaker ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.72$, 95% CI [2.062, 2.604], $t[255.743] = 21.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.45$). Furthermore, participants rated the rule bender as more rule bending ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 0.92$, 95% CI [5.299, 5.585]) than the rule breaker ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.11$, 95% CI [3.872, 4.224], $t[301.320] = 12.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.37$) and the rule abider ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.85$, 95% CI [3.031, 3.601], $t[238.164] = 13.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.46$). Finally, participants rated the rule breaker as more rule breaking ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 0.93$, 95% CI [6.021, 6.315]) than the rule bender ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.21$, 95% CI [4.275, 4.653], $t[297.873] = 14.07$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.58$) and the rule abider ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.93$, 95% CI [2.621, 3.219], $t[234.970] = 19.25$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.14$). Together, these results show that our manipulation of rule abiding, rule bending, and rule breaking was successful.

Table 5
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between the Variables of Interest in Study 2

Variables of interest	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Sex	0.45 (0.50)	—										
2. Age	36.58 (10.87)	−.050	—									
3. Bending condition	NA	−.033	.074	—								
4. Breaking condition	NA	.037	.016	−.493**	—							
5. Bending manipulation check	4.26 (1.62)	−.116*	−.031	.515**	−.093*	—						
6. Breaking manipulation check	4.50 (1.95)	−.035	−.020	−.012	.599**	.471**	—					
7. Abiding manipulation check	4.03 (2.01)	−.046	−.106*	−.055	−.591**	−.118**	−.603**	—				
8. Perceived dominance	4.66 (1.14)	−.092*	.115*	.152**	.364**	.480**	.667**	−.525**	—			
9. Perceived prestige	4.59 (0.98)	.087	.010	.116*	−.459**	.039	−.493**	.510**	−.344**	—		
10. Leadership granting coop	4.23 (1.75)	.015	−.079	.056	−.495**	.115*	−.395**	.795**	−.390**	.583**	—	
11. Leadership granting comp	4.38 (1.54)	−.053	−.045	.197**	−.262**	.451**	−.020	.383**	.100	.452**	.589**	—

Note. $N = 480$ (except for gender where one nonbinary individual was excluded from the current analyses). Sex: 0 = male, 1 = female; bending condition: 0 = abiding + breaking conditions, 1 = bending condition; breaking condition: 0 = abiding + bending conditions, 1 = breaking condition. NA = not applicable.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Hypotheses Testing

In this study, we could again test Hypotheses 1, 2, 4, and 5, whereas the different contexts for leadership granting did not allow us to directly test Hypotheses 3 and 6 (these were replaced with Hypotheses 7 and 8). As can be seen in Table 6, rule breakers were seen as more dominant (supporting Hypothesis 1) but less prestigious (supporting Hypothesis 2) than rule abiders. Rule benders were seen as more dominant than rule abiders (supporting Hypothesis 4) and more prestigious than rule breakers (supporting Hypothesis 5).

Leadership Granting in Competitive Situations. Hypothesis 7 stated that in competitive situations, rule benders are granted more leadership than rule abiders (Hypothesis 7a) because rule benders appear more dominant than rule abiders (Hypothesis 7b). A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between the three conditions on leadership granting in competitive situations, $F(2, 477) = 19.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .075$.[4] In line with Hypothesis 7a, a planned contrast indicated that rule benders were indeed granted more leadership than rule abiders, $t(321.000) = 1.98$, $p = .0245$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.020, Inf], $d = 0.197$. As Table 7 shows, a multiple mediation analysis with bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effects of dominance (confirmatory) and prestige (exploratory) supported the role of dominance for leadership granting in competitive situations, $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.46$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.327, Inf]. As predicted, rule benders were seen as more dominant than rule abiders, $B = 1.06$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(293.886) = 9.20$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.883, Inf], and increased dominance perceptions resulted in increased leadership granting, $B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(475) = 6.93$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.328, Inf]. Hypothesis 7b was therefore supported.

An exploratory multiple mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of prestige when comparing rule benders with rule breakers, $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.63$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.472, 0.817]. Rule benders were seen as more prestigious than rule breakers, $B = 0.81$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(477) = 8.30$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.616, 0.998], and greater prestige perceptions resulted in greater leadership granting, $B = 0.78$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(475) = 11.13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.639, 0.913]. This suggests that both dominance and prestige are beneficial in competitive situations and rule benders—who demonstrate both—are preferred as leaders over rule breakers and rule abiders. Furthermore, rule breakers and rule abiders also differed in terms of leadership granting. Rule breakers were granted less leadership in competitive settings compared with rule abiders, $t(290.866) = -4.08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.043, −0.390], $d = -0.482$, and compared with rule benders, $t(288.403) = -5.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.337, −0.681], $d = -0.679$.

Leadership Granting in Cooperative Situations. Hypothesis 8 stated that, in cooperative situations, rule benders are granted more leadership than rule breakers (Hypothesis 8a) because rule benders appear more prestigious than rule breakers (Hypothesis 8b). A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between the three conditions on leadership granting in cooperative situations, $F(2, 477) = 98.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .292$. In line with Hypothesis 8a, a planned contrast indicated that rule benders were indeed granted more leadership than rule breakers $t(310.240) = 7.48$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [1.106, Inf], $d = 0.925$. As Table 7 shows, a multiple mediation analysis with bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effects of prestige (confirmatory) and dominance (exploratory) supported the role of prestige for leadership granting in cooperative situations, $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.59$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.451, Inf]. Rule benders were seen as more prestigious than rule breakers, $B = 0.81$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(309.150) = 8.14$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.646, Inf], and increased prestige perceptions resulted in increased leadership granting, $B = 0.73$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(475) = 10.28$, $p < .001$ (one-sided), 95% CI [0.611, Inf]. Hypothesis 8b was therefore supported.

An exploratory multiple mediation analysis further revealed a significant indirect effect of dominance when comparing rule benders and rule abiders, $B_{\text{indirect}} = -0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [−0.332, −0.047]. Rule benders were seen as more dominant than rule abiders, $B = 3.84$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(477) = 50.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.692, 3.992], and increased dominance perceptions resulted in reduced leadership granting, $B = -0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(475) = -2.52$, $p = .012$, 95% CI [−0.283, −0.035]. This suggests that dominance harms leadership granting in cooperative contexts. In contrast,

[4] The results are identical for Hypothesis 7 and Hypothesis 8 when using a mixed design with experimental condition (abide vs. bend vs. break) as between-subjects variable and context (competitive vs. cooperative) as within subjects variable. See Supplemental Material Part E for details.

Table 6
Means and Standard Deviations per Condition in Study 2

Measure	Experimental condition		
	Abide (n = 163)	Bend (n = 160)	Break (n = 157)
Dominance	3.84_a (1.19)	4.90_b (0.86)	5.25_c (0.82)
Prestige	5.05_a (0.83)	4.75_b (0.83)	3.94_c (0.93)
Leadership granting in a competitive context	4.52_a (1.34)	4.81_b (1.32)	3.80_c (1.77)
Leadership granting in a cooperative context	5.29_a (1.10)	4.37_b (1.55)	2.99_c (1.73)

Note. Means (standard deviations). All responses were recorded on 7-point Likert scales. Means in the same row with a different subscript differ significantly from each other at $p < .05$. For post hoc tests, Dunnett T3 (i.e., a pairwise comparison test based on the studentized maximum modulus) was used for dominance, and competitive and cooperative leadership granting to account for unequal variances, and Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference was used for prestige.

prestige facilitates leadership granting in both competitive and cooperative contexts. Not surprisingly then, rule breakers, who demonstrate higher dominance and lower prestige, were granted less leadership in cooperative contexts, both compared to rule abiders, $t(263.010) = -14.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−2.630, −1.980], $d = -1.558$, and to rule benders, $t(310.240) = 7.48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.707, −1.054], $d = -0.933$.

Additional Exploratory Analyses

We also explored the within-participant differences in leadership granting in the cooperative versus competitive contexts depending on condition using a repeated measures analysis. We found a main effect of granting in the cooperative versus competitive setting, $F(1, 478) = 6.95$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .014$, and an interaction between condition and setting (cooperative vs. competitive) on leadership granting, $F(2, 477) = 61.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .204$. More specifically, our data showed that the rule abider was granted more leadership in the cooperative than in the competitive setting, $t(162) = 6.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.63$. The rule bender was granted more leadership in the competitive than in the cooperative setting, $t(162) = 4.72$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.31$. Finally, the rule breaker was granted more leadership in the competitive than in the cooperative setting, $t(162) = 7.69$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.47$. These results suggest that even though rule breakers are granted the least leadership overall, they are seen as relatively more interesting for a leader role under competitive conditions. Additionally, although rule abiders seem to be granted relatively more leadership in general, this granting is relatively less likely in competitive situations. When combining these findings with the results above, competitive settings seem to make people relatively more open to individuals who are more likely to bend or break rules, compared to those abide by the rules.

Discussion

Study 2 showed that rule benders were preferentially granted leadership in cooperative settings (compared to rule breakers) and competitive settings (compared to rule abiders and rule breakers) due to perceptions of relatively high prestige and dominance. Moreover, we provided further support for our prediction that rule benders are preferred as leaders over rule breakers due to their perceived prestige. Compared to rule abiders, rule benders were granted slightly more leadership in competitive settings and slightly less leadership in cooperative settings. Whereas individuals prefer to have rule abiders as leaders in cooperative settings, rule abiders become less attractive as leaders in competitive settings that require more dominance. Finally, rule breakers were granted the least leadership but were afforded more leadership in competitive than in cooperative settings. Exploratory analyses provided further insights into the relative importance of dominance and prestige across contexts. Whereas dominance increased

Table 7
Indirect Effects on Leadership Granting in Study 2 for the Comparison of Rule Benders With Rule Abiders and Rule Breakers

Context	Predictor	Mediator	Hypothesis	Indirect effect on leadership granting
Competitive	Abide (0) versus bend (1)	Dominance	H7b	$B = 0.46$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.327, Inf]
		Prestige		$B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [−0.410, −0.101]
	Break (0) versus bend (1)	Dominance		$B = -0.15$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.251, −0.069]
		Prestige	E	$B = 0.63$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.472, 0.817]
Cooperative	Abide (0) versus bend (1)	Dominance	E	$B = -0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [−0.332, −0.047]
		Prestige		$B = -0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [−0.377, −0.103]
	Break (0) versus bend (1)	Dominance		$B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.014, 0.128]
		Prestige	H8b	$B = 0.59$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.451, Inf]

Note. Empty cells under the header "Hypothesis" indicate that we did not have formal predictions concerning this effect. An "E" in the same column denotes an exploratory finding that we discuss in the text. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; H = hypothesis; Inf = infinite.

leadership granting in competitive contexts, it reduced leadership granting in cooperative contexts. In contrast, prestige always increased leadership granting.

General Discussion

In the present article, we introduced the concept of rule bending as behavior that infringes a rule without technically breaking it. Whereas the social consequences of rule breaking and rule abiding behaviors have been the focus of much previous research (for a review, see Van Kleef et al., 2015), how individuals deal with rules in daily life is often not black or white but rather shows shades of gray. Building on the dominance-prestige framework (Cheng et al., 2013), we argued that how individuals deal with rules signals different levels of dominance and prestige. We argued that rule breaking is associated with dominance, which by itself will not result in voluntary leadership granting by others, except when dominance is useful for the group—that is, in competitive settings. Conversely, we argued that rule bending is associated with both dominance and prestige because it implies getting around obstacles without doing something that could be punished. Finally, we argued that rule abiding is associated with prestige as abiders reinforce the rules that sustain collective functioning but signal no dominance. In both studies, we find clear evidence that rule breakers are granted less leadership (although they were comparatively more attractive in competitive settings; Study 2) compared to rule benders and rule abiders. Our data also suggest that rule benders are granted more leadership than rule abiders but especially so in more competitive situations. Exploratory analyses in Study 2 provided further insights into the relative importance of dominance and prestige across contexts. Whereas dominance was relatively more positively associated with leadership granting in competitive contexts, it was negatively associated with leadership granting in cooperative contexts. In contrast, prestige was always positively associated with leadership granting. This suggests that prestige is always valued in leaders, whereas dominance is generally not valued but still facilitates leadership granting when competitive situations call for it.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings have both theoretical and practical implications. First, from a theoretical perspective, we demonstrate that there is more to rules than breaking them or abiding by them. By investigating the gray area between breaking and abiding by rules, we provide a more fine-grained view on rule-related behaviors. We believe it is important to consider these nuances as many behaviors may not appear as outright rule breaking. Indeed, people are hesitant to engage in outright rule breaking and often try to find ways around the rules (Gross et al., 2018). Observers appear to differentiate between these different rule-related behaviors and respond relatively more positively to individuals who circumvent rather than break the rules. Given that rules are intended to create and maintain well-functioning societies, not following the rules could result in disorder and chaos. While the observed negative responses toward rule breakers are therefore quite functional (e.g., Heerdink et al., 2019), the more positive responses toward rule benders potentially pose a risk to organizations and society. If the gray area of rule bending is preferred over rule abiding, influential individuals (i.e., leaders) are not prevented from challenging rules devised to promote the functioning of societies.

Second, the results of our studies are in line with the conceptualization of dominance and prestige as independent strategies to leadership (Cheng et al., 2013). Whereas Study 1 showed that both dominance and prestige contribute to leadership granting, Study 2 points to their differential importance depending on context. First, the effects of dominance on leadership granting depend on the nature of the situation. That is, dominance is more strongly associated with leadership granting in competitive rather than cooperative settings. Furthermore, our exploratory findings speak to the importance of prestige in the presence of dominance. That is, the findings regarding responses to rule benders seem to suggest that increased levels of prestige can offset the negative association between dominance and voluntary leadership granting. As such, our research is consistent with previous work that highlights the importance of prestige over dominance for leadership granting (C. Anderson & Kilduff, 2009) and expands on this notion by showing that dominance can enhance leadership granting in competitive contexts when it is matched with prestige.

Third, research has examined different forms of rule breaking, one of which is potentially associated with more prestige, that is prosocial, or constructive, rule breaking (Morrison, 2006; Van Kleef et al., 2012). Prosocial rule breaking is defined as intentionally violating organizational rules or policies to promote the welfare of the organization or (one of) its stakeholders. This type of rule violation is potentially more functional than selfish violations as it is intended to benefit the greater good (e.g., Vardaman et al., 2014). Even though there is some evidence that prosocial rule breaking is indeed associated with leadership granting (Roulet, 2019; Van Kleef et al., 2012), other work has found negative performance ratings for those who engage in prosocial rule breaking (Dahling et al., 2012). Although we did not explicitly differentiate between prosocial and pro-self motives in our studies, one could assume that the protagonist's actions were intended to keep the company alive. However, we find limited evidence that rule breaking is met with positive responses in this situation, whereas rule bending is. Given the prevalence of rule bending, it would be interesting to see when individuals are most likely to engage in constructive bending behaviors and whether bending needs to be associated with prosocial intentions in order to have positive effects.

From a practical perspective, we provide a framework for understanding an understudied albeit widespread phenomenon: rule bending. Our insights into the appeal of rule benders for leadership positions may help make more conscious decisions when promoting candidates in organizations. Especially in competitive settings which are predominant in the financial (Kofman, 2016) and tech sectors (Levin, 2017), rule benders may appeal to people's desire for a leader who demonstrates both dominance and prestige (Hare et al., 1997). When rule benders are granted leadership, this may trigger a self-reinforcing loop (cf. Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Van Kleef et al., 2015) through which rule benders receive ever more influence. On the one hand, a promotion signals to others which behaviors are rewarded and thus which behaviors must be exhibited if someone desires a promotion. On the other hand, people who arrived in leadership positions after bending rules will likely continue bending rules. They thereby encourage subordinates to also bend rules, either by posing as successful role models or by directly instructing subordinates to circumvent the rules. Whereas some rules can be hindering or even outright harmful (Bicchieri et al., 2018), many

rules function to uphold cooperative, orderly, and peaceful societies. Understanding the appeal of rule benders may help keep them from attaining positions in which they can stimulate a climate that encourages rule bending.

Limitations and Future Directions

As any research, the present study is not without limitations. First, our research relied on scenarios, and we should be cautious in generalizing the findings given the hypothetical nature of the situations we investigated. For example, people may be hesitant to admit that they would grant leadership to a rule breaker in a questionnaire, whereas they might be more willing to do so if this would mean that the company they work for stays in business. The relatively low stakes associated with our experimental approach may have rendered participants less likely to see the potential benefits of breaking rules. As a result, participants might have been more likely to condemn rule breaking. Interestingly, participants did grant leadership to rule benders across studies, which suggests that the relatively low stakes involved in the experimental setting may not have been an issue, at least not when judging the appeal of rule benders for leadership positions. Additionally, it is important to note that the rule behaviors displayed in our scenarios were relatively inconsequential for the observer. Even though participants did respond differentially to these behaviors, situations in which the rule is more important for the observer might limit the prestige associated with rule bending. Recently, Stein et al. (2022) showed that even slight alterations to religious rules evoked moral outrage and punishment, arguably to protect the sacredness of these rules. Future research could examine rules that are more consequential to observers to see whether rule bending will still be seen as something relatively positive. Next to the possible consequences of a rule, some rules might be seen as generally unjust, arbitrary, or wrong, whereas others are seen as highly relevant and useful. One could expect that rule bending (and potentially even rule breaking) is seen as more admirable (and thus prestigious) when rules are seen as detrimental rather than useful.

A second potential limitation is that the mediators and dependent variable in our studies were measured at the same time point, which prevented us from drawing conclusions about the causality and direction of the associated relationships. However, previous research that manipulated perceptions of dominance and prestige found that these perceptions causally predicted power and influence (e.g., Cheng et al., 2013). Moreover, by using an experimental method, we can preclude a possible alternative interpretation of our findings that leadership or dominance and prestige caused rule handling behaviors. Still, we should note that leadership and power are dynamic processes such that there might be feedback loops from power to perceptions of dominance and prestige as well as to the way actors handle rules. Future research could more directly investigate such feedback loops.

A third potential limitation is that rule benders—besides signaling dominance and prestige—might also demonstrate that they can solve dilemmas creatively. Data reported in the online Supplemental illustrate that rule benders are seen as more creative, but that controlling for creativity ratings does not change the conclusion regarding dominance and prestige as underlying mechanisms. However, especially in fields that require creativity (e.g., design), rule benders may be perceived as ideal leader candidates because they appear to be creative. Thus, in addition to perceptions of prestige and dominance, perceptions of creativity might drive the effects of norm bending on leadership granting in certain situations. Moreover, in circumstances where creativity is seen as furthering the goals of the group, creativity may fuel prestige, which would in turn support leadership granting. Future research could pursue this possibility further by varying the extent to which a leadership role requires creativity.

A fourth limitation of our studies is related to constraints on generality (Simons et al., 2017). Our studies were conducted in relatively loose cultures, which begs the question of whether the findings generalize to more tight cultures (Stamkou, Van Kleef, Homan, Gelfand, et al., 2019). Tightness–looseness refers to the degree to which rule violations are punished versus tolerated (Gelfand et al., 2011). People in tighter cultures might consider rule bending as reflecting low prestige as they tend to show comparatively less appreciation for people who meddle with rules. As a consequence, the amount of prestige that a rule bender attracts may be insufficient to gain leadership in tighter cultures. Future research could investigate in how far rule benders are considered prestigious and dominant across cultural contexts and in how far prestige and dominance translate into leadership granting in different cultural contexts.

Finally, previous research suggests some interesting ways to extend our research model with other moderators and dependent variables. Research from an intergroup perspective (Abrams et al., 2008, 2013) illustrated that ingroup leaders might have more leeway (or credits) to transgress rules and norms. As such, outgroup members who bend rules might be seen as less attractive leaders compared to ingroup members. Moreover, one could predict that especially under higher (but not lower) levels of identification with the group, positive role modeling (which is associated with prestige) results in more positive responses (Ramdass & Hogg, 2019). Given that rule benders are seen as relatively more prestigious than rule breakers, they might be especially attractive as leaders for high identifiers. With regard to extending our research with other relevant outcomes, we would like to see research on the downstream consequences of granting leadership to rule benders to understand whether they are actually effective in their role (e.g., by enhancing the group's performance) and how the way they handle rules influences adherence to the rules by others.

Conclusion

We introduced the concept of rule bending as behavior that infringes a rule without technically breaking that rule. In two studies, we demonstrated that rule bending differs from both rule abiding and rule breaking in terms of dominance and prestige, which has implications for leadership granting. In Study 1, rule benders, who were perceived as more dominant than rule abiders and as more prestigious than rule breakers, were granted more leadership than rule breakers and slightly more leadership than rule abiders. In Study 2, in which we manipulated context, rule benders were granted more leadership in competitive (rather than cooperative) settings. By investigating the gray area between breaking and abiding by rules, we provide a more fine-grained outlook on rule-related behaviors. We believe it is important to consider these nuances as many behaviors may not appear as outright rule breaking. By introducing the concept of rule bending and embedding it within the dominance/prestige framework (Cheng et al., 2013), we hope to contribute to the development of a nuanced and generative theoretical framework for future research.

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Received June 29, 2022
Revision received September 27, 2023
Accepted September 29, 2023 ■