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ARTICLE

Cynical people desire power but rarely acquire it: Exploring the role of cynicism in leadership attainment

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Abstract

Do cynical individuals have a stronger desire for power and are they more likely to acquire power at work? The negative consequences of cynicism—for cynics themselves and the people around them—render the examination of these questions particularly important. We first examined the role of cynicism in power motives. Results showed that more cynical individuals have a greater desire for power to avoid exploitation by others (and less so to exploit others; Study 1) and score higher on dominance (but not prestige or leadership) motives (Study 2). The subsequent two studies examined the role of cynicism in power attainment at work. A study of virtual teams (Study 3) showed that more cynical individuals were less likely to emerge as group leaders, and a prospective study of ~9000 employees followed for up to 10 years (Study 4) showed that cynicism predicted a lower likelihood of attaining a leadership position in organizations. Taken together, more (vs. less) cynical individuals have a stronger power—in particular, dominance—motive but they are not more successful at power acquisition. These findings inform the literature on cynicism and power and highlight the importance of cynical worldviews for leadership attainment.

KEYWORDS

career success, cynicism, leader emergence, leadership, power, power motives

BACKGROUND

Are most people benevolent and altruistic or are human actions primarily guided by self-interest? Individuals differ in how they respond to this question. Some believe in the benevolence of human nature, while others subscribe to a more negative, cynical view of others. This individual difference has been referred to as cynical beliefs about human nature—or briefly cynicism (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016; Wrightsman, 1992). Cynicism is defined as 'a belief that self-interest is the ultimate motive behind all human actions, even the seemingly good ones, and that people will go to any lengths to satisfy it' (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2019, p. 1). In the academic literature, cynicism has been linked with negative outcomes in different areas of life, including poor social relationships, financial hardship, physical and mental health problems, marital distress and even higher mortality risks (Baron et al., 2007; Everson et al., 1997; Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016, 2019).

Despite its growing interest in cynicism, research has largely ignored the role of cynicism in one area of social life: power, that is, asymmetric control over valued resources, including one's own as well as others' resources (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). This is surprising as the concepts of cynicism and power seem to be inherently inter-related. For example, Thomas Hobbes, a 17th-century philosopher and the father of cynicism, saw power essential for survival (Read, 1991). A cynical view of human nature is also a guiding principle of the very first handbook of strategies to secure power: 'The Prince' by Niccolo Machiavelli (Machiavelli, 1950/1532). The book inspired the development of the 'manipulative personality' (Machiavellianism), that is, a tendency to use manipulative interpersonal tactics for personal gain (Christie & Geis, 1970; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The construct of Machiavellianism is diverse: some conceptualizations encompass a cynical worldview, agency and status-seeking (Collison et al., 2018; Dahling et al., 2008; Monaghan et al., 2020), while more narrow definitions restrict Machiavellianism to the utilization of tactics involving deceit, manipulation and exploitation (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Kessler et al., 2010). The majority of investigations examining Machiavellianism and its relationship with career success have centred their theoretical frameworks on manipulative interpersonal strategies (Furnham & Treglown, 2021; Kückelhaus & Blickle, 2023). Consequently, although the psychological literature has extensively examined the effectiveness and shortcomings of Machiavellian tactics (Kückelhaus & Blickle, 2023; Spurk et al., 2016), little is known about the role of cynical worldviews in power attainment.

The multiple negative consequences of cynicism for the cynics themselves (Spiridonova et al., 2023; Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016, 2019) but also for the ones who depend on them (Byza et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2009) and the fact that power puts individuals in a position that makes their beliefs and actions particularly consequential for others, render the study of the connections between cynicism and power especially important. To understand the link between cynicism and power, the current research examined how cynicism predicts two different but related outcomes: power motives (what people desire) and power attainment (what people actually get).

POWER MOTIVES

A cynical worldview implies that people would go to any length to satisfy their self-interest, suggesting that one cannot depend on others to be trustworthy and reliable. Under this assumption, attaining power might appear like a viable strategy to reduce one's dependence on others and, consequently, one's vulnerability to their (potentially malevolent) actions. Indeed, besides providing individuals with greater opportunities to influence others, power can provide them with a greater opportunity to be independent from others, satisfying their need for autonomy (Cartwright & Press, 1959; Lammers et al., 2016). This could be particularly important for more (vs. less) cynical individuals as they tend to have a weaker sense of personal control and mastery, feeling that how their life unfolds is mostly beyond their control (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2018). Attaining power could be seen as a way to restore a sense of personal control (Inesi et al., 2011). For example, existing research showed that having power over others leads

to an increased sense of control over outcomes, even when these outcomes are determined by chance (Fast et al., 2009).

Cynical individuals might have stronger power motives partly because power can help them protect themselves from potential exploitation and give them independence and autonomy from others. However, power can also provide control over others (Lammers et al., 2016) and consequently, the opportunity to exploit them. Existing research has shown that cynical individuals can be easily tempted to take advantage of others when given a chance (Stavrova et al., 2020). Hence, it is possible that cynical individuals desire power not exclusively as a way to protect themselves from exploitation but also to maximize personal gains (e.g. by taking advantage of others). Taken together, these arguments suggest that, in order to avoid exploitation from others and/or to benefit by taking advantage of others, more (vs. less) cynical individuals will be more likely to have stronger power motives.

Which aspects of power do cynical individuals find appealing? To gain a more nuanced understanding of the link between cynicism and power motives, we draw from the taxonomy of power motive—dominance, prestige and leadership (Suessenbach et al., 2019)—that are also referred to as strategies of power attainment (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2021). Dominance motives describe individuals' desire to dominate others, to put others down, control them and bend them to one's will. High-dominance individuals do not shy away from using aggressive tactics to achieve their goals, including verbal aggression, bullying, emotional blackmailing, ostracism or other fear-inducing threatening and intimidating means. Prestige motives refer to individuals' desire to be respected, recognized for one's abilities, skills and achievements and admired. Finally, leadership motive describes individuals' willingness to take initiative and responsibility in order to guide a group toward a common goal. Individuals with a strong leadership motive enjoy being in charge, relish opportunities in which they can lead others and take the initiative and step up when such opportunities arise. Consistent with these definitions, dominance-based strategies allow power attainment through conflict, threat and intimidation, prestige-based strategies allow power attainment through displays of competence and skills and leadership-based strategies allow power attainment through the willingness and ability to coordinate group effort (Suessenbach et al., 2019).

Of these three motives, we anticipate cynical individuals to find dominance particularly appealing and, in an attempt to ascent the social hierarchy, to be more likely to rely on dominance-based strategies. Both cynicism and dominance are characterized by low agreeableness, high anger-proneness, aggression and Machiavellian tactics (Blötner et al., 2022; Stavrova et al., 2020; Suessenbach et al., 2019). Cynicism often implies distrust, and could thus lead to an increased adoption of dominance strategies such as monitoring and surveillance of others (Mead & Maner, 2012). Both cynicism and dominance involve a negative outlook on others and negative interpersonal behaviours. Cynics view their social world from an antagonistic, hostile perspective, a world where one's gains come at the expense of others' losses (Różycka-Tran et al., 2015). Perceptions of such antagonism and hostility have been linked with the use of dominance-based strategies in prior research (McGregor et al., 2023). In addition, perceptions of losing control, uncertainty and perceived threat to one's social rank were associated with dominance motive and shown to trigger dominance behaviours in prior research (Mitchell et al., 2020; Suessenbach et al., 2019). Cynical individuals might thus consider dominance behaviours as a means to prevent being taken advantage of and rely on dominance strategies in the form of 'preemptive strikes'.

POWER ATTAINMENT

As we have discussed above, cynics might be more likely to desire power, in particular, dominance. But are they more likely to acquire power? In exploring this question, we focused on power attainment at work. Work organizations are often characterized by hierarchical structures and power disparities, and are, therefore, particularly well-suited to study power attainment. In work organizations, power represents a core element of leadership, it constitutes the 'means leaders have to potentially influence others' (Antonakis et al., 2017, p. 6).

We proposed that cynics are likely to have stronger dominance motives and rely on dominance behaviours (e.g. to secure power). Dominance is linked to mostly destructive behaviours and practices that will likely undermine (rather than contribute to) power attainment. Dominance is associated with counterproductive work behaviour (Schattke & Marion-Jetten, 2021), use of threats and manipulative tactics (Case & Maner, 2014) and engaging in self-interested actions at a cost of sacrificing the team's interests (Maner & Mead, 2010). In collaborative settings, dominance strategies are even met with resistance from group members (Ridgeway & Diekema, 1989) and yield harsher punishment in case of transgressions (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017). Taken together, cynics' preference for dominance might render them less likely to attain leadership roles in organizations.

In this research, we tested the association between cynicism and two forms of leadership attainment. Leadership attainment can involve both a vertical, top-down process where individuals are appointed as leaders by higher-ranking authorities as well as a more informal process where individuals who are seen as 'leaderlike' by peers and exert a substantial influence over the group, 'emerge' as leaders (see emergent leadership, Hanna et al., 2021). Therefore, we examined the role of cynicism in both: we studied formal leader appointments using a large-scale nationally representative panel dataset of over 9000 workers followed for up to 10 years and we studied informal leader emergence using peer nominations in a leaderless group discussion paradigm.

PRESENT RESEARCH

We examined cynicism's link with power motives (Studies 1 and 2) and power attainment (in the form of attaining a formal or an informal leadership position; Studies 3 and 4). Study 1 explored the connections of cynicism with the desire for power to avoid being taking advantage of versus to benefit from taking advantage of others. Study 2 made use of the dominance-prestige-leadership taxonomy (Suessenbach et al., 2019) and tested the associations of cynicism with these three power motives. Studies 3 and 4 examined whether cynics are more or less likely to actually attain positions of power. Specifically, using a college students' sample from the Netherlands, Study 3 tested the effect of cynicism on leader emergence (using peer nominations in a leaderless group discussion paradigm) within online work groups. Using nationally representative panel data of workers in Germany, Study 4 tested whether baseline cynicism predicts moving up through company management ranks in the following 10 years.

Study materials, data (Studies 1–3) and scripts can be accessed at: https://osf.io/4dejt/. Data from Study 4 can be obtained on the data owner's (German Institute for Economic Research DIW Berlin) website: https://www.diw.de/en/diw_01.c.601584.en/data_access.html.

STUDY 1

Study 1 tested whether cynical individuals are more likely to have stronger power motives. We also explored the two potential reasons why cynics might desire power—to avoid potential exploitation or to have a possibility to exploit others—by comparing the strength of the association between cynicism and these two types of motives.

The study was preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/wy3jb.pdf.

Method

Participants

Participants were first-year undergraduate psychology students from a Dutch university. They were given 2 weeks to complete the study online. Given our previous experience using this method, we

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, correlations among the variables, Study 1.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Cynicism	2.72	0.70	–	–	–
2. Power motives UMS	3.90	1.11	.24*** [0.16, 0.31]	–	–
3. Fear of exploitation	3.57	1.27	.49*** [0.43, 0.54]	.20*** [0.13, 0.27]	–
4. Willingness to exploit	2.17	1.07	.35*** [0.28, 0.42]	.39*** [0.32, 0.45]	.14*** [0.07, 0.22]

Note: ***$p < .001$; 95% confidence intervals are in the brackets.

expected to recruit at least 400 participants within 2 weeks, allowing us to detect a small effect ($r = 0.14$; 80% power, $\alpha = 5\%$, two-tailed test). A total of 689 participants filled in the survey; one participant had missing values on the key variables and was removed from the analysis. The final sample consisted of 688 individuals ($M_{age} = 20.12$, $SD_{age} = 2.66$, 19.1% male).

Measures

Cynicism was measured with the eight-item Cynical Distrust (CD) scale (Greenglass & Julkunen, 1989; Stavrova et al., 2020). This scale is a validated and commonly used measure of cynicism (Choy et al., 2021; Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016, 2018, 2019). Participants were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with items such as 'It is safer to trust nobody' or 'Most people make friends because friends are likely to be useful to them' (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

To measure *power motives*, we used the power motives subscale of the Unified Motives scale (UMS) (Schönbrodt & Gerstenberg, 2012). It consisted of 10 items. For the first five[1] items, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree with different statements pertaining to power attainment (e.g. 'I would like to be an executive with power over others' or 'I have little interest in leading others' [reverse-coded]; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). For the last five items, participants were asked to indicate how important having power is to them (e.g. 'The opportunity to exercise control over an organization or group' or 'To be in a leadership position in which others work for me or look to me for direction'; 1 = not at all, 7 = very important). The items were reverse-coded where necessary and combined into a single index of power motives (Cronbach's $a = .88$).

We measured participants' *fear of exploitation* using six items (e.g. 'I tend to worry that other people will take advantage of me' or 'I think a lot about how to avoid getting exploited by others'; Cronbach's $a = .89$). We also measured participants' *willingness to exploit others* using six items (e.g. 'I wouldn't mind taking advantage of others if that would advance my interests' or 'I wouldn't mind using other people to get what I want'; Cronbach's $a = .92$[2]). Both constructs were measured with a 7-point response scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

The order of the four scales described above (i.e. cynicism, power motives, fear of exploitation, willingness to exploit) was randomized across the participants. At the end of the survey, participants provided basic socio-demographic information.

Results

Cynicism was positively associated with power motives (see Table 1). This association holds after adjusting for gender (male = 1, female = 0) and age, as covariates ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.30]). Note

[1]One item was not included due to an error.

[2]One of the items contained a typo. Removing this item resulted in the same results as reported here.

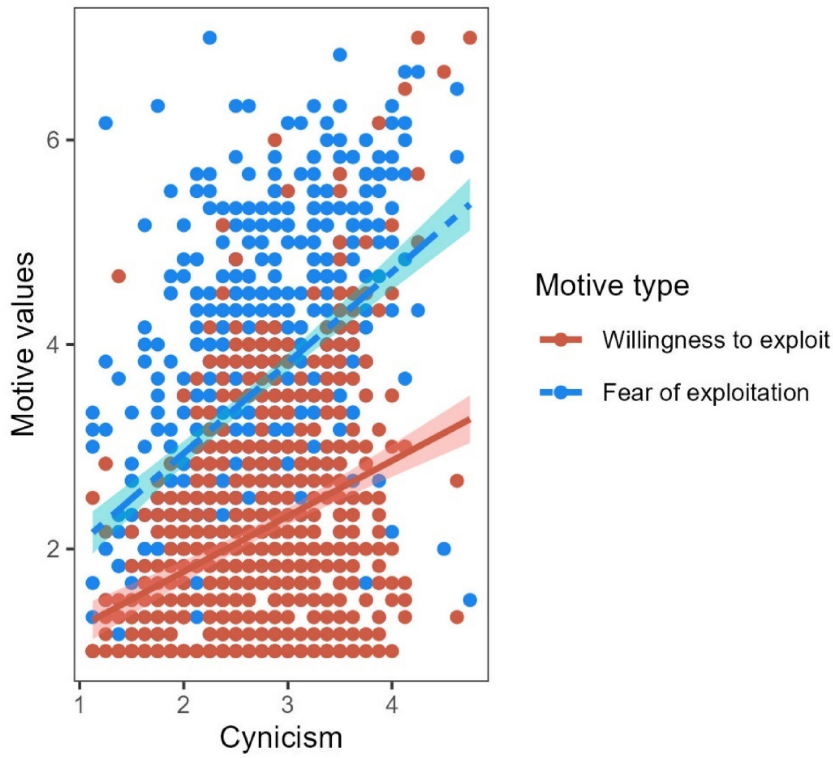

FIGURE 1 Association of cynicism with the willingness to exploit others versus the fear of being exploited by others, Study 1.

that men and older participants had stronger power motives also (gender: $\beta = .10$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.17]; age: $\beta = .09$, $p = .021$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.16]).

Cynicism was also positively associated with fear of exploitation and willingness to exploit, both of which predicted stronger power motives. A subsequent parallel mediation analysis showed that both—fear of exploitation and willingness to exploit—significantly mediated the effect of cynicism on power motive (see Supporting Information for details).

In a set of exploratory analysis, we tested which type of motive is stronger among cynics: the fear of exploitation, or the willingness to exploit others. We estimated a mixed regression model with the type of motive (fear of exploitation vs. willingness to exploit, coded as −1 and 1, respectively) as a within-subject predictor, cynicism (mean-centred) as a between-subject predictor and their interaction term. The criterion was the individuals' scores on (both) motives. We included a random intercept at the level of participants. The significance of cynicism x motive type interaction adds a formal comparison of the effect of cynicism on the different motive types, answering the question of whether cynicism predicts fear of exploitation significantly more strongly than it predicts the desire to exploit. The results revealed a significant main effect of cynicism such that more cynical individuals reported higher fear of exploitation and willingness to exploit ($b = 0.71$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.63, 0.79]), a significant main effect of motive type such that individuals on average reported more fear of exploitation than willingness to exploit others ($b = 0.70$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.65, 0.76]). Importantly, we observed a significant interaction ($b = 0.17$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.25]), indicating that cynicism was more strongly associated with fear of exploitation than with the willingness to exploit others. See Figure 1.

Discussion

Study 1 showed that cynicism was associated with stronger power motives. Additionally, cynicism showed a stronger association with the fear of becoming a victim of exploitation than the willingness to exploit others for personal gains. In Study 2, we extended the investigation of cynicism and power motives by exploring what aspects of power cynics value most: dominance, prestige or leadership.

STUDY 2

Study 2 explored the association of cynicism with dominance, prestige and leadership motives in a working adult sample. The study was preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/ck6kf.pdf.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from Prolific Academic. Using Prolific pre-screening filters (full- and part-time employment status), only working adults were invited to participate. In total, 400 participants completed the study. Three participants failed an attention check ('To monitor data quality, please select the middle of the scale here'), resulting in the final sample of 397 participants ($M_{age} = 40.26$, $SD_{age} = 11.98$, 49.9% male). 74% indicated to be full-time employed and 21% indicated to be part-time employed.[3] Using Monte Carlo simulations ($n = 1000$) as implemented in simr package in R, this sample gave us 100% power for obtaining the effect of $b = 0.17$ (interaction effect between motive type and cynicism, based on Study 1) at alpha = .05.

Measures

Cynicism was measured with two instruments: the Cynical Distrust (CD) scale that was also used in Study 1 (Greenglass & Julkunen, 1989; Stavrova et al., 2020; Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) and a 5-item version of the Faith in People (FP) scale (Rosenberg, 1956) adapted from the German Socio-Economic Panel (Study 4; Wagner et al., 2007). Both scales belong to a set of standard measures of cynicism used in prior research (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016, 2018). The FP items included: (1) 'Do you believe that most people would exploit you if they had the opportunity or would attempt to be fair toward you?' (1 = would exploit, 2 = would be fair), (2) 'Would you say that for most of the time, people attempt to be helpful or only act in their own interests?' (1 = attempt to be helpful, 2 = act in their own interest), (3) 'On the whole one can trust people', (4) 'Nowadays, one cannot rely on anyone', and (5) 'If one is dealing with strangers, it is better to be careful before one can trust them' (for items 3–5: 1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree). The responses were recoded so that higher values indicated more cynicism. Following past work (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016), we standardized participants' responses to each item and then combined them into a composite of cynicism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). As preregistered, we conducted separate analyses with the two cynicism measures collected here: Cynical Distrust (CD) and Faith in People (FP). Note that for both measures, higher values reflect more cynicism.

[3]Despite using a pre-screening filter, 5% indicated to be students, unemployed, retired or having an 'other' employment status. Removing these participants did not change our results, therefore we decided to keep them.

Like in Study 1, to measure *power motives*, we used the power motives subscale of the Unified Motives scale (UMS) (Schönbrodt & Gerstenberg, 2012; Cronbach's $a = .93$). We measured fear of exploitation (Cronbach's $a = .91$) and willingness to exploit (Cronbach's $a = .95$) using the same scales as in Study 1. Responses were given on a 6-point scale.

To assess individuals' dominance, prestige and leadership motives, we used the Dominance, Prestige and Leadership Motives Scale (DoPL) (Suessenbach et al., 2019). We used the six-item per subscale version. The first subscale measures the dominance motive, with statements like 'I enjoy bending others to my will' (Cronbach's $a = .92$). The second subscale assesses prestige motive, with items like 'I want to be respected and admired by other people' (Cronbach's $a = .92$). The third subscale examines leadership motive, with statements like 'I relish opportunities in which I can lead others' (Cronbach's $a = .87$). Participants indicated their agreement level for each item (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). As preregistered, for the main analyses, we removed three items that were part of the Leadership subscale ('I feel confident when directing the activities of others', 'I make a good leader' and 'I am often the leader') because, in our view, their content reflects leadership attainment/effectiveness (rather than a specific motive[4]). Note that our results remained consistent after removing these items. The order of all the scales described above was randomized across the participants.

The survey additionally included several potential control variables: agreeableness and extraversion from the Mini-IPIP (Cronbach's *a*s = .85 and .82; Donnellan et al., 2006), self-control (one item 'People would say that I have iron self-discipline', 1 'strongly disagree'—7 'strongly agree') and life satisfaction (one item, 1 'extremely dissatisfied'—10 'extremely satisfied'). We also collected socio-demographic information (gender, age, education level, full- vs. part-time employment status).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are shown in Table 2. The CD and FP measures of cynicism were strongly correlated with each other ($r = .73$). Like in Study 1, cynicism was positively associated with both fear of exploitation and willingness to exploit others. However, in contrast to Study 1, we did not observe a significant association between cynicism and the power motives subscale of UMS. These results held for both CD and FP scales of cynicism.

Both CD and FP cynicism scales were positively associated with dominance and not associated with prestige. The correlations of cynicism with leadership were negative, although only in the case of FP significant ($p = .015$).

Like in Study 1, we tested whether cynicism is significantly more strongly related to the fear of exploitation or the willingness to exploit others. We used the same analytic strategy as in Study 1. The results are shown in Table 3. We detected a significant cynicism × motive interaction, suggesting that cynicism was more strongly associated with fear of exploitation than with the willingness to exploit others, see Figure 2. Adding the control variables listed in the methods section did not change these results (Table 3, Models 2).

Finally, using the same strategy, we tested whether cynicism was more strongly associated with dominance (vs. prestige and leadership). As the correlational results suggested a different pattern for dominance (vs. leadership or prestige), we chose dominance as the reference category. For both cynicism scales, the cynicism × prestige and cynicism × leadership interactions were significant, suggesting that cynicism predicted dominance significantly more strongly than it predicted leadership and prestige, see Table 4. The results were robust against adding the control variables (Table 4, Models 2) and are shown in Figure 3.

[4]It is interesting to note that cynicism showed a negative association with the item that reflects leadership attainment ('I'm often the leader'; $r = -.10$, $p = .049$ (CD) and $r = -.13$, $p = .008$ (FP)), consistent with the results of Study 3 and 4.

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, correlations among the variables, Study 2.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Cynicism (CD)	2.97	0.76											
2. Cynicism (FP)	0.00	0.78	.73*** [0.68, 0.77]										
3. Power motive UMS	2.89	0.98	.08 [−0.02, 0.18]	.02 [−0.08, 0.12]									
4. Fear of exploitation	3.34	1.08	.60*** [0.53, 0.66]	.52*** [0.44, 0.59]	.19** [0.09, 0.28]								
5. Willingness to exploit	2.18	1.03	.35*** [0.26, 0.43]	.23*** [0.13, 0.32]	.43*** [0.34, 0.50]	.21*** [0.12, 0.30]							
6. Dominance	2.07	0.95	.30*** [0.21, 0.39]	.22*** [0.13, 0.31]	.50***[a] [0.43, 0.58]	.31*** [0.22, 0.40]	.74*** [0.69, 0.78]						
7. Prestige	3.67	0.93	.07 [−0.03, 0.17]	−.00 [−0.10, 0.09]	.59*** [0.52, 0.65]	.24*** [0.14, 0.33]	.24*** [0.15, 0.33]	.33*** [0.24, 0.42]					
8. Leadership	3.31	1.20	−.08 [−0.18, 0.02]	−.12* [−0.22, −0.02]	.73***[a] [0.71, 0.80]	.04 [−0.06, 0.13]	.16** [0.07, 0.26]	.26***[a] [0.13, 0.31]	.48*** [0.40, 0.56]				
9. Agreeableness	3.83	0.81	−.32*** [−0.41, −0.23]	−.23*** [−0.32, −0.13]	−.06 [−0.16, 0.04]	−.10 [−0.19, 0.00]	−.42*** [−0.49, −0.33]	−.30*** [−0.39, −0.21]	.05 [−0.05, 0.15]	.11* [0.01, 0.21]			
10. Extraversion	2.64	0.95	−.15** [−0.25, −0.05]	−.21*** [−0.30, −0.11]	.36*** [0.27, 0.44]	−.15** [−0.24, −0.05]	.10* [0.00, 0.20]	.12* [0.03, 0.22]	.31*** [0.21, 0.39]	.36*** [0.28, 0.45]	.28*** [0.19, 0.37]		
11. Life satisfaction	6.57	1.89	−.27*** [−0.36, −0.18]	−.26*** [−0.35, −0.17]	.08 [−0.02, 0.18]	−.27*** [−0.36, −0.18]	−.18*** [−0.27, −0.08]	−.15** [−0.24, −0.05]	.11* [0.01, 0.20]	.21*** [0.11, 0.30]	.24*** [0.15, 0.33]	.30*** [0.21, 0.39]	
12. Self-control	3.81	1.55	−.04 [−0.14, 0.06]	.03 [−0.07, 0.12]	.06 [−0.04, 0.16]	.02 [−0.08, 0.12]	−.04 [−0.14, 0.05]	−.07 [−0.16, 0.03]	.00 [−0.09, 0.10]	.09 [−0.01, 0.18]	.02 [−0.08, 0.11]	.10* [0.00, 0.20]	.23*** [0.13, 0.32]

Note: *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; 95% confidence intervals are in the brackets. We noticed the three items ('I have little interest in leading others', 'I feel confident when directing the activities of others' and 'I try to control others rather than permit them to control me') were part of both the UMS and the DoPL. While we administered the scales as they are, we removed the overlapping items when computing the correlations among these respective scales (the differences to the correlations computed using the full sets of items do not exceed |.02|).

TABLE 3 Mixed models assessing the strength of cynicism's associations with fear of exploitation versus willingness to exploit others, Study 2.

	Cynicism: CD scale						Cynicism: FP scale					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
Predictors	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***
(Intercept)	2.76	2.70–2.82	**<.001**	3.28	2.73 to 3.83	**<.001**	2.76	2.69–2.83	**<.001**	3.86	3.30 to 4.43	**<.001**
Cynicism	0.66	0.58–0.74	**<.001**	0.59	0.50 to 0.68	**<.001**	0.40	0.32–0.47	**<.001**	0.33	0.26 to 0.40	**<.001**
Motive	0.58	0.52–0.64	**<.001**	0.58	0.52 to 0.65	**<.001**	0.58	0.52–0.64	**<.001**	0.58	0.52 to 0.65	**<.001**
Cynicism × Motive	0.19	0.11–0.27	**<.001**	0.19	0.11 to 0.27	**<.001**	0.16	0.10–0.23	**<.001**	0.16	0.10 to 0.22	**<.001**
Agreeableness	–	–	–	−0.10	−0.19 to −0.01	**.024**	–	–	–	−0.20	−0.29 to −0.10	**<.001**
Extraversion	–	–	–	0.10	0.03 to 0.17	**.008**	–	–	–	0.12	0.05 to 0.20	**.002**
Life satisfaction	–	–	–	−0.06	−0.10 to −0.03	**.001**	–	–	–	−0.07	−0.11 to −0.03	**<.001**
Self-control	–	–	–	0.01	−0.03 to 0.05	.696	–	–	–	−.01	−0.05 to 0.04	.768
Gender	–	–	–	0.22	0.09 to 0.36	**.001**	–	–	–	.19	0.05 to 0.33	**.010**
Age	–	–	–	−0.01	−0.01 to −0.00	**.001**	–	–	–	−.01	−0.02 to −0.00	**<.001**
Education	–	–	–	0.09	0.01 to 0.17	**.025**	–	–	–	.05	−0.03 to 0.14	.214

Note: Gender: Cynicism was mean-centered. Motive: 1 = fear of exploitation, −1 = willingness to explore. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; Education: 1 = primary, 5 = doctoral degree. CI = 95% Confidence Intervals. Bold indicates significance level at *p*-value <.001.

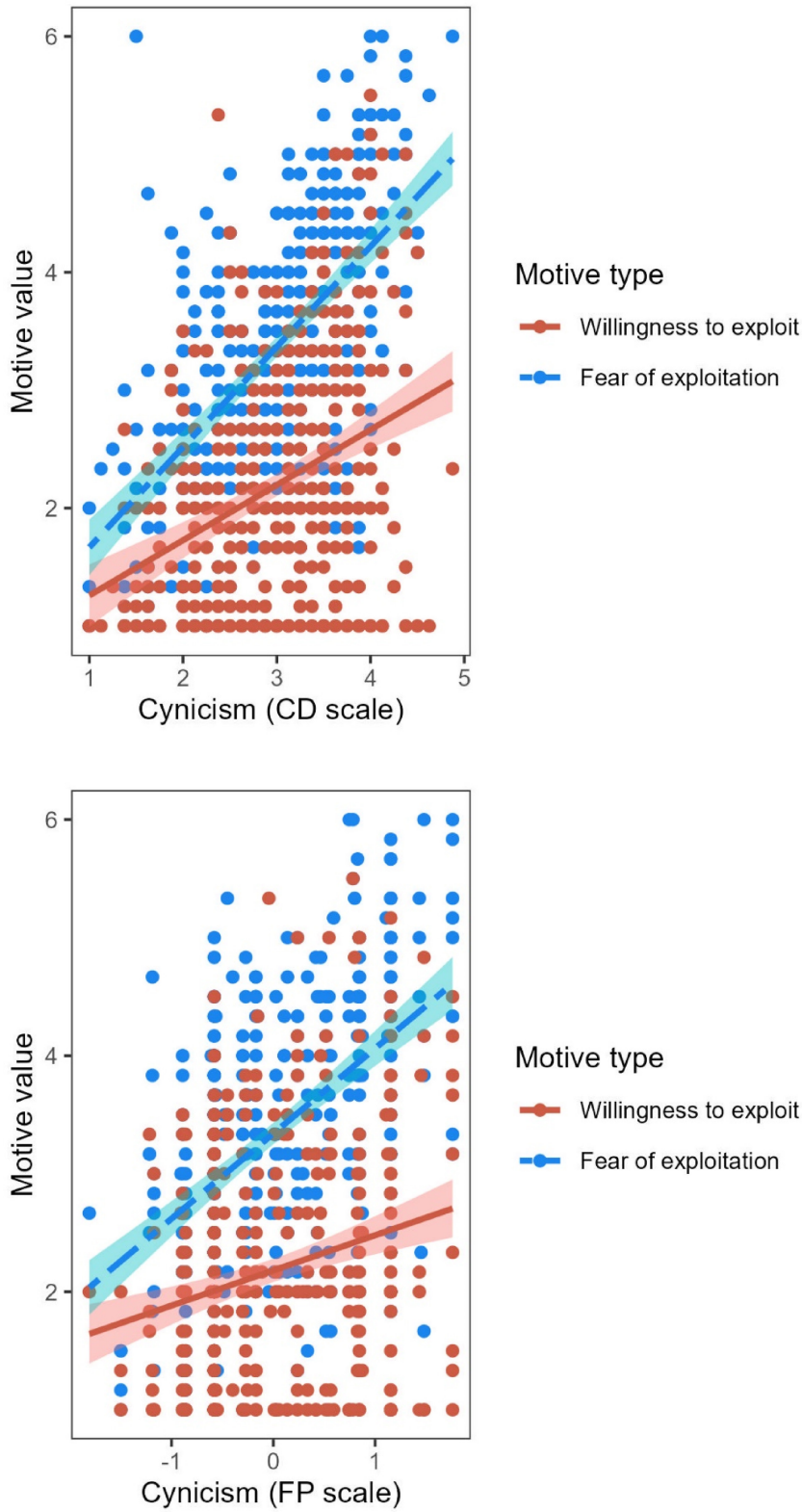

FIGURE 2 Association of cynicism with the willingness to exploit others versus the fear of being exploited by others, Study 2.

TABLE 4 Mixed models assessing the strength of cynicism's associations with dominance, prestige and leadership, Study 2.

	Cynicism: CD scale						Cynicism: FP scale					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
Predictors	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***	**Estimates**	**CI**	***p***
(Intercept)	2.07	1.97 to 2.17	**<.001**	1.51	0.91 to 2.10	**<.001**	2.07	1.97 to 2.17	**<.001**	1.71	1.13 to 2.29	**<.001**
Cynicism	0.37	0.24 to 0.51	**<.001**	0.40	0.27 to 0.53	**<.001**	0.21	0.11 to 0.31	**<.001**	0.24	0.14 to 0.34	**<.001**
Motive: Leadership	1.24	1.13 to 1.35	**<.001**	1.23	1.11 to 1.34	**<.001**	−0.36	−0.47 to −0.24	**<.001**	−0.35	−0.46 to −0.23	**<.001**
Motive: Prestige	1.61	1.49 to 1.72	**<.001**	1.59	1.48 to 1.71	**<.001**	−0.21	−0.33 to −0.10	**<.001**	−0.22	−0.33 to −0.10	**<.001**
Motive: Dominance (reference)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Cynicism × Motive: Leadership	−0.50	−0.65 to −0.35	**<.001**	−0.50	−0.65 to −0.35	**<.001**	−0.36	−0.47 to −0.24	**<.001**	−0.35	−0.46 to −0.23	**<.001**
Cynicism × Motive: Prestige	−0.29	−0.44 to −0.14	**<.001**	−0.29	−0.44 to −0.14	**<.001**	−0.21	−0.33 to −0.10	**<.001**	−0.22	−0.33 to −0.10	**<.001**
Cynicism × Motive: Dominance (reference)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Agreeableness	–	–	–	−0.08	−0.17 to 0.02	.112	–	–	–	−0.11	−0.20 to −0.01	**.027**
Extraversion	–	–	–	0.31	0.24 to 0.39	**<.001**	–	–	–	0.32	0.24 to 0.39	**<.001**
Life satisfaction	–	–	–	0.02	−0.02 to 0.06	.334	–	–	–	0.01	−0.03 to 0.05	.491
Self-control	–	–	–	−0.03	−0.07 to 0.02	.240	–	–	–	−0.03	−0.07 to 0.02	.216
Gender	–	–	–	0.16	0.02 to 0.31	**.027**	–	–	–	0.15	0.00 to 0.29	**.046**
Age	–	–	–	−0.01	−0.02 to −0.01	**<.001**	–	–	–	−0.01	−0.02 to −0.01	**<.001**
Education	–	–	–	0.16	0.07 to 0.25	**<.001**	–	–	–	0.15	0.06 to 0.24	**.001**

Note: Gender: Cynicism was mean-centered. Motive: 1 = fear of exploitation, −1 = willingness to explore. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; Education: 1 = primary, 5 = doctoral degree. CI = 95% Confidence Intervals. Bold indicates significance level at *p*-value <.001.

Discussion

Replicating the results of Study 1, Study 2 showed that cynicism had a stronger association with the fear of becoming a victim of exploitation than the willingness to exploit others for personal gains. Importantly, Study 2 revealed that the aspect of power cynics desire was dominance but not necessarily prestige or leadership. In the following two studies, we turn to the question of whether cynics are more likely to attain power.

STUDY 3

Study 3 took an informal approach to leadership attainment, referred to as emergent leadership (Hanna et al., 2021). In the traditional approach to leadership, leadership attainment involves a vertical, top-down process where individuals are selected for leadership roles via the process of formal promotion or hiring decisions typically initiated by higher-ranking individuals in the organizations. In contrast, emergent leadership involves a less formalized leader role assignment where individuals assume an informal leadership role by being seen as 'leaderlike' by peers and exerting a considerable influence over the group (Hanna et al., 2021). To study leader emergence, we used the leaderless discussion paradigm (Ensari et al., 2011) where groups of participants worked together in a 30-min long online session on several brainstorming tasks. At the end of the session, participants were asked to nominate one of the group mates as a group leader, which served as our primary dependent variable. We tested whether group member cynicism (measured before the group session) predicted a lower likelihood of being nominated as a group leader.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students in a research university in the Netherlands who participated in the study for course credits. We aimed to recruit as many participants as possible using our participant pool of first-year undergraduate students during the spring term of 2022. As a result of an extremely inactive participant pool during the period of remote classes under COVID-19 regulations, we were only able to obtain four participants. We further sought out opportunities to recruit undergraduate students who enrolled in a psychology class. Our final sample reached 173 participants ($M = 21.77$, $SD = 2.52$, 21.4% male). This sample size is comparable to the sample size in past studies that used research paradigms that require extensive interactions in small-group settings (Badura et al., 2018; Borteyrou et al., 2015; Ren et al., 2016). A sensitivity power analysis using 1000 simulations with the simr package (Green & MacLeod, 2016) showed that the smallest effect of cynicism on leader emergence that we could detect at $\alpha = .05$ and 81% power was $b = -0.22$ (OR = 0.80; multilevel Poisson regression).

Procedure

The study was held as a class activity online. At the beginning of each study session, participants signed the consent form and completed an online survey consisting of several personality questionnaires including cynicism (the full list of measures is available on the project's OSF page). Afterward participants were randomly assigned to groups of 6 and performed group work. Most participants were not acquainted with each other: 92% of the sample indicated that they had never met other members of their group before. Each group further received detailed instructions regarding the group tasks they were about to perform: an icebreaker task where participants were asked to introduce themselves to each

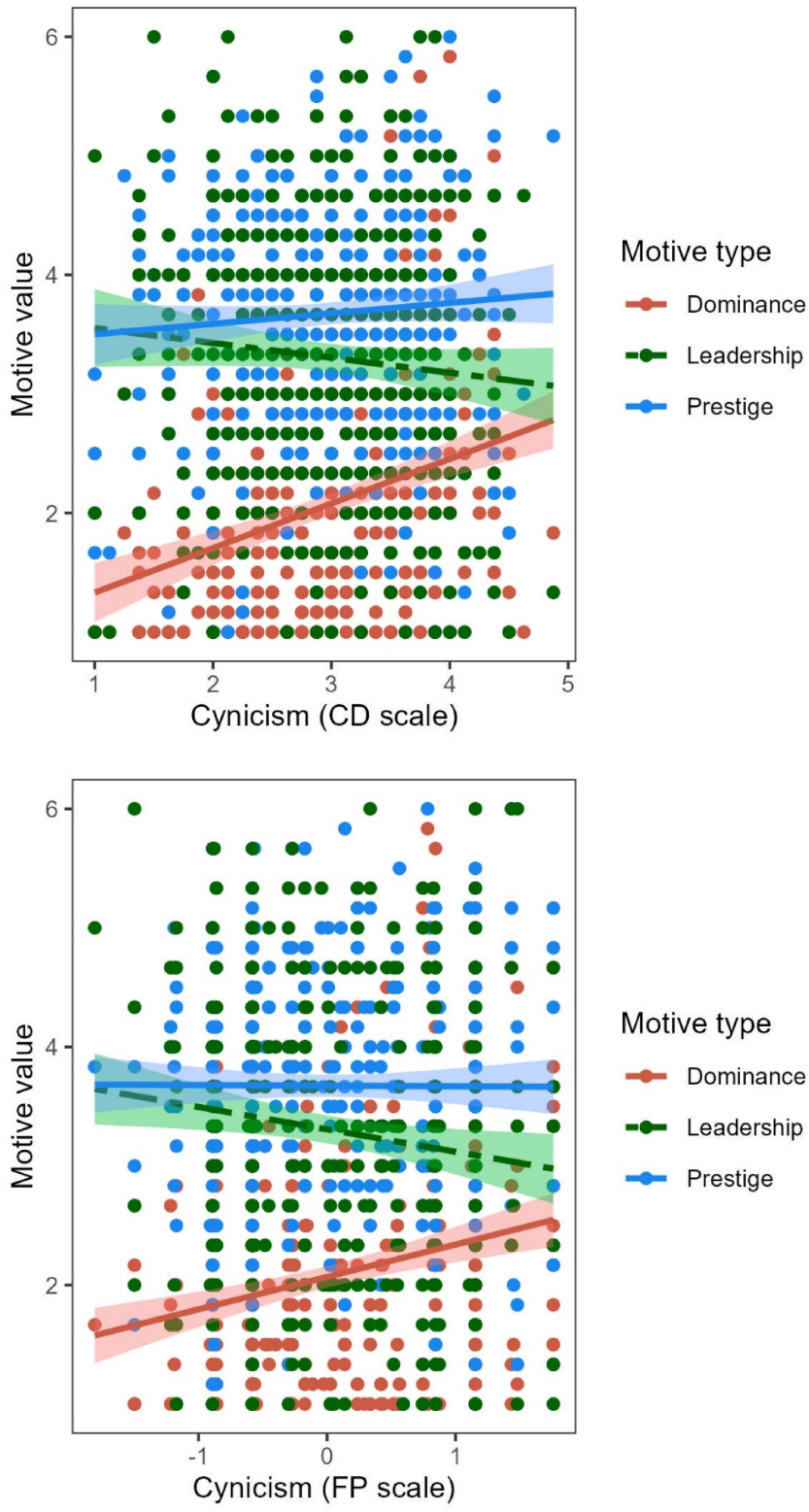

FIGURE 3 Association of cynicism with dominance, prestige and leadership motives, Study 2.

other, a creativity task where participants had to come up with as many uses of a glass bottle as possible and a moon landing task, where participants had to agree on the ranking of different survival objects in case of a crash on the moon (see Supporting Information; Hall & Watson, 1970). Each group was given 30 min to complete the tasks.[5] When the time was up, each participant was directed to complete an online survey reporting their experience working in the group and their perceptions of other members. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Measures

To measure *cynicism*, participants completed a four-item version of the cynical distrust (CD) scale (Greenglass & Julkunen, 1989; Stavrova et al., 2020; see Supporting Information for the list of items). Responses were given on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$).

To measure leader emergence, participants were asked to select a member in their group who they would nominate as a leader of their group during this session (using a dropdown menu; self-nomination was not possible as participants' name was not included in the dropdown menu). The number of nominations each participant received (ranging from 0 to 5) was used as a measure of leader emergence. Note that the maximum possible number of nominations differed across groups due to the varying group size; this was taken into account in our analyses (please see the 7.2 section for details).

We measured the same control variables using the same measures as in Study 2: Mini-IPIP (Donnellan et al., 2006) subscales of extraversion and agreeableness (extraversion $a = .84$, agreeableness $a = .68$), trait self-control and life satisfaction. We also included age, gender (1 = male, 0 = female) and ethnic background (1 = European, 0 = other) as additional covariates.

Results

We first inspected the zero-order correlations among the variables. Cynical individuals received fewer nominations for leadership role than their less cynical counterparts ($r = -.21$, $p = .006$; Table 5). To illustrate, the average number of nominations received by the most cynical participants in the sample (top 25%) was only 0.71 ($SD = 0.90$); whereas the least cynical participants in the sample (bottom 25%) received an average of 1.26 nominations ($SD = 1.16$).

Given that the dependent variable—number of leadership nominations—represents a count, we used a Poisson regression in the main analyses. Because the groups slightly differed in the number of members (between 3 and 6, with a median of 5 members) and these differences determined the maximum number of nominations each member could possibly receive, we used the log-transformed group size as the offset variable by adding it as a covariate (Gagnon et al., 2008). Finally, to account for the nested nature of the data (participants nested within groups), we included a random intercept at the level of groups. The analyses were conducted using the lme4 package in R. All continuous variables were standardized before the analyses so that the model coefficients reflect changes in standard deviations. Model 1 tested the zero-order effect of cynicism, while Model 2 additionally included the covariates described above.

Consistent with the pattern of results suggested by the zero-order correlations, Model 1 showed that an individual's cynicism predicted fewer leadership nominations. Specifically, one standard deviation increase in cynicism was associated with a 23% decrease in leadership nominations rate (OR = 0.77, $p < .001$; Table 6). Model 2 showed that this effect was robust after controlling for extraversion,

[5]Note that this study involved a manipulation that is irrelevant to the current research. Specifically, some participants were asked to switch their webcam on and others were asked to switch their webcam off during the group work. The effect of cynicism on leader emergence was not affected by the experimental condition (see Supporting Information for details regarding the manipulation).

TABLE 5 Means, standard deviations and correlations with confidence intervals, Study 3.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Leader nominations	0.97	1.20								
2. Cynicism	2.88	0.73	−.21** [−0.35, −0.06]							
3. Agreeableness	4.26	0.55	.09 [−0.06, 0.24]	−.21** [−0.35, −0.06]						
4. Extraversion	3.16	0.90	.01 [−0.14, 0.16]	−.12 [−0.26, 0.03]	.10 [−0.05, 0.24]					
5. Life satisfaction	6.99	1.74	.02 [−0.13, 0.17]	−.20** [−0.34, −0.06]	.10 [−0.05, 0.25]	.24** [0.10, 0.38]				
6. Self-discipline	4.04	1.53	−.03 [−0.18, 0.12]	.04 [−0.11, 0.19]	.07 [−0.08, 0.21]	−.03 [−0.18, 0.12]	.19* [0.04, 0.33]			
7. Gender	0.22	0.41	−.00 [−0.15, 0.15]	.17* [0.02, 0.31]	−.31** [−0.44, −0.17]	−.13 [−0.27, 0.02]	−.05 [−0.19, 0.11]	.04 [−0.11, 0.19]		
8. Age	21.77	2.52	.07 [−0.08, 0.21]	−.08 [−0.22, 0.07]	−.02 [−0.17, 0.13]	−.05 [−0.20, 0.10]	.13 [−0.02, 0.27]	−.16* [−0.30, −0.01]	.21** [0.06, 0.35]	
9. Ethnicity	0.82	0.39	.12 [−0.03, 0.27]	−.05 [−0.20, 0.10]	.12 [−0.03, 0.26]	.11 [−0.04, 0.25]	.05 [−0.10, 0.20]	−.01 [−0.16, 0.14]	.03 [−0.12, 0.18]	−.04 [−0.19, 0.11]

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; ethnicity: 1 = European, 0 = other.

TABLE 6 Multilevel Poisson regression predicting leader nominations, Study 3.

	Number of leader nominations			Number of leader nominations		
Predictors	**Incidence rate ratios**	**CI**	***p***	**Incidence rate ratios**	**CI**	***p***
Cynicism	0.77	0.66–0.90	**.001**	0.79	0.67–0.93	**.006**
log(group size)	0.99	0.45–2.19	.985	0.94	0.41–2.17	.894
Agreeableness				1.17	0.97–1.41	.107
Extraversion				1.01	0.85–1.18	.950
Life satisfaction				0.94	0.80–1.12	.499
Self-control				0.99	0.84–1.17	.940
Age				1.06	0.90–1.24	.481
Gender				1.17	0.77–1.77	.456
Ethnicity				1.68	1.02–2.76	**.040**

Note: CI are 95% confidence intervals. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; ethnicity: 1 = European, 0 = other.
Bold indicates significance level at *p*-value <.001.

agreeableness, self-control, life satisfaction and basic socio-demographic variables (OR = 0.79, $p < .001$). No other predictors reached significance, except for ethnicity (European (vs. other) ethnicity was associated with more leadership nominations, OR = 1.68, $p = .040$). Finally, as the comparison of the mean and the variance of the count of leadership nominations showed some overdispersion (see Table 5), as robustness checks, we repeated the analysis using the Poisson model with observation-level random effects (Harrison, 2014) and using a negative binomial model. These additional analyses supported our conclusions and are shown in Supporting Information.

Discussion

Using the leaderless group discussion paradigm, Study 3 revealed that cynical individuals were less likely to be nominated as group leaders by their peers. This effect remained robust against controlling for several other personality traits such as agreeableness and extraversion, as well as basic socio-demographics.

STUDY 4

While Study 3 tested the effect of cynicism on leader emergence in small groups interacting online, Study 4 examined the link between cynicism and power attainment in the form of a formal leadership position within their work organizations. We used a large nationally representative panel dataset of German workers spanning 10 years. We tested whether workers' cynicism measured at the study's onset is associated with the likelihood of attaining a leadership position in the future.

Method

Participants

We used the data of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP, v35). GSOEP is a nationally representative annual household panel that includes about 22,000 individuals. Panel members complete annual interviews including detailed information about their socio-economic characteristics, work

and family life. A measure of cynicism was included in 2008 and the information about participants' leadership status at work was updated every 2 years, starting from 2007. Our sample included individuals who were full- or part-time employed in 2007, filled in the cynicism scale and answered the question related to their leadership status ($N = 9100$, $M_{\text{age in 2007}} = 43.69$, $SD_{\text{age in 2007}} = 10.76$, 54.5% male).

Measures

To measure *cynicism*, participants responded to five items which were derived from the Faith in People Scale (Rosenberg, 1956) that were used in Study 2. Higher values indicated more cynicism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$).

As a measure of power attainment in organizations, participants indicated whether they had a *leadership role* at work ('In your position at work, do you supervise others? In other words, do people work under your direction?'; yes or no). To make sure that the effect of cynicism is not due to a confounding with broader personality dimensions, our analyses included the Big Five traits (measured in 2009). In GSOEP, the Big Five were measured using a brief version of the Big Five inventory (Gerlitz & Schupp, 2005). Each dimension was measured with three items answered on a 7-point scale (Extraversion: Cronbach's $a = .66$; Neuroticism: Cronbach's $a = .62$; Conscientiousness: Cronbach's $a = .61$; Agreeableness: Cronbach's $a = .52$; Openness: Cronbach's $a = .65$).

Based on past research, we also carefully selected several variables which are potentially associated with power attainment and adjusted for these variables as additional covariates in our analyses. These covariates were: gender (0 = female, 1 = male), age, migration background (0 = no, 1 = yes), education (number of years), employment (part-time = 0, full-time = 1), whether they work in the occupation they were trained for (0 = no, 1 = yes), their tenure with the organization (in years), number of overtime hours per week, lifetime experience in full-time, part-time employment and unemployment (in years). All continuous variables were standardized before the analyses so that the coefficients can be interpreted in terms of change in standard deviations.

Results

Baseline cynicism was negatively associated with holding a leadership position in any given year (r between −.04 in 2007 and −.10 in 2017, all ps < .001; see Table 7).

We explored the effect of baseline cynicism on the likelihood of attaining a leadership position in the following 10 years. This analysis was conducted among participants who did not have a leadership position at baseline (i.e. in 2007): $n = 6179$. Of them, 1208 (19.5%) attained a leadership position in the following 10 years. To explore the effect of cynicism on leadership attainment, we used discrete-time survival analysis (Singer & Willett, 2003). Model 1 included an indicator of time (in 2-year increments; 4 dummies) and baseline cynicism (standardized). Model 2 added socio-demographic and work-related control variables, and Model 3 further added the Big Five variables. The main results are presented below (for all coefficients, see Table 8).

Model 1 showed that over the course of 10 years, cynical individuals were less likely to reach a leadership position than their less cynical counterparts (OR = 0.987, $p < .001$). One standard deviation higher cynicism score at baseline was associated with a 1% lower probability of attaining a leadership position within the following 10 years. Models 2 and 3 showed that the effect of cynicism remained stable after adjusting for relevant socio-demographic variables and work-related characteristics as well as the Big Five (OR = 0.99, $p < .001$ in both models).

We also observed that, besides our focal predictor of cynicism, several other variables were significant predictors of the likelihood of leadership attainment. Of the socio-demographic and economic control variables, male gender, more years of education and more overtime hours were associated with

TABLE 7 Means, standard deviations and correlations, Study 4.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	13
1. Cynicism	−0.00	0.69	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Leadership	0.35	0.48	−.06***	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Gender	0.55	0.50	.04***	.20***	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Age	43.68	10.76	−.04***	.04***	.03***	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Migration	0.13	0.34	.06***	−.07***	.00	−.11***	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Education	13.01	2.76	−.27***	.20***	.01	.04***	−.16***	–	–	–	–	–	–
7. Job-related training	0.64	0.48	−.13***	.11***	−.02***	−.04***	−.09***	.27***	–	–	–	–	–
8. Tenure	14.03	10.78	−.03***	.08***	.06***	.47***	−.10***	−.02***	.11***	–	–	–	–
9. Overtime hours	2.31	3.55	−.01	.24***	.16***	−.03***	−.04***	.12***	.04***	−.05***	–	–	–
10. Experience full-time	20.72	12.23	.04***	.14***	.37***	.69***	−.10***	−.06***	−.02***	.49***	.04***	–	–
11. Experience part-time	3.79	6.67	−.04***	−.17***	−.48***	.18***	−.01***	−.05***	−.04***	.04***	−.13***	−.43***	–
12. Unemployment experience	0.61	1.48	.10***	−.11***	−.04***	.00	.08***	−.16***	−.17***	−.26***	−.05***	−.10***	.02***

Note: ***$p < .001$; 95%. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; Migration: 1 = yes, 0 = no; Employment: 1 = currently employed part-time, 0 = currently employed full-time; Job-related training: 1 = obtained training in the current occupation, 0 = did not obtain training in the current occupation; Tenure = tenure with the organization in years; Experience full-time, part-time and unemployment experience: cumulative life-time experience in years.

TABLE 8 Multilevel regression results, Study 4.

	DV: Probability of leadership								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	OR	95% CI	*p*	OR	95% CI	*p*	OR	95% CI	*p*
Cynicism	0.99	0.99–1.00	**<.001**	0.99	0.99–1.00	**<.001**	0.99	0.99–1.00	**.001**
Year 2009[a]	1.13	1.11–1.14	**<.001**	1.12	1.11–1.13	**<.001**	1.12	1.11–1.13	**<.001**
Year 2011[a]	1.17	1.15–1.18	**<.001**	1.16	1.14–1.17	**<.001**	1.16	1.14–1.18	**<.001**
Year 2013[a]	1.20	1.18–1.21	**<.001**	1.19	1.17–1.21	**<.001**	1.19	1.17–1.21	**<.001**
Year 2015[a]	1.22	1.20–1.24	**<.001**	1.20	1.18–1.22	**<.001**	1.20	1.18–1.23	**<.001**
Year 2017[a]	1.21	1.19–1.23	**<.001**	1.19	1.16–1.21	**<.001**	1.20	1.17–1.22	**<.001**
Socio-economic controls									
Gender	–	–	–	1.01	1.00–1.02	**.017**	1.02	1.01–1.03	**.001**
Age	–	–	–	0.99	0.97–1.00	**.011**	0.99	0.98–1.00	**.032**
Migration	–	–	–	0.99	0.97–1.00	**.046**	0.99	0.97–1.00	**.029**
Education	–	–	–	1.02	1.01–1.02	**<.001**	1.02	1.01–1.02	**<.001**
Employment	–	–	–	0.96	0.95–0.97	**<.001**	0.96	0.95–0.97	**<.001**
Job-related training	–	–	–	1.01	1.00–1.02	**.025**	1.01	1.00–1.02	**.038**
Overtime hours	–	–	–	1.04	1.03–1.04	**<.001**	1.04	1.03–1.04	**<.001**
Tenure	–	–	–	0.99	0.98–0.99	**<.001**	0.99	0.98–1.00	**.001**
Experience full-time	–	–	–	1.01	0.99–1.02	.394	1.00	0.99–1.01	.888
Experience part-time	–	–	–	1.00	0.99–1.01	.865	1.00	0.99–1.01	.524
Unemployment experience	–	–	–	0.99	0.99–1.00	**.009**	0.99	0.99–1.00	**.009**
Big Five									
Openness	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.01	1.00–1.01	**.002**
Conscientiousness	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.02	1.01–1.02	**<.001**
Extraversion	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.01	1.00–1.01	**<.001**
Agreeableness	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.99	0.99–1.00	**.016**
Neuroticism	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.00	0.99–1.00	.295

Abbreviation: OR, odds ratios.

Bold indicates significance level at *p*-value <.001.

[a]Reference year is 2007. Continuous variables were standardized before the analyses. Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; migration: 1 = yes, 0 = no; employment: 1 = currently employed part-time, 0 = currently employed full-time; job-related training: 1 = obtained training in the current occupation, 0 = did not obtain training in the current occupation; Tenure = tenure with the organization in years; Experience full-time, part-time and unemployment experience: cumulative life-time experience in years.

a higher likelihood of leadership (ORs between 1.02 and 1.04, all *p*s < .001); older age, migration background, part- (vs. full) time contract, longer organizational tenure and prior unemployment experience were associated with a lower likelihood of leadership (ORs between 0.96 and 0.99, all *p*s < .001). Of the Big Five, openness, conscientiousness and extraversion were associated with a stronger likelihood of leadership (ORs between 1.01 and 1.02, all *p*s < .001), while agreeableness was associated with a lower likelihood of leadership (OR = 0.99, *p* < .05).

Discussion

Using a large panel dataset of working adults in Germany, we showed that employee cynicism in 2008 was associated with a lower likelihood of attaining a position of leadership within the following 10 years.

Importantly, this effect was robust when controlling for a variety of employee socio-economic and work-related characteristics as well as the Big Five traits. Note that some of the effect sizes are modest or small. We will return to this point in the General Discussion. Overall, together with the results of Study 4, we showed that cynicism predicts a lower likelihood of both, leader emergence in a virtual team (Study 3) and a formal appointment for a leadership position in an organization (Study 4).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Do more (vs. less) cynical individuals have particularly strong power motives? And are they more likely to acquire power at work? Obtaining answers to these questions are important because cynical individuals have higher antisocial behavioural tendencies (Hardy & Smith, 1988; Stavrova et al., 2020) and, given the degree to which powerful individuals can shape others' lives, the question of whether endorsing a cynical worldview can help one attain power could have broader negative consequences for individuals, organizations and societies at large.

To answer these two questions, we conducted a series of four studies. Our results suggest that despite having a stronger desire for power (Study 1, although not replicated in Study 2) and a stronger dominance motive specifically (Study 2), cynical individuals are less likely to attain positions of power at work than less cynical individuals. Specifically, cynical individuals were less likely to get nominated for leadership position by their peers in online work groups (Study 3) and were less likely to attain a leadership position in their work organizations in a 10-year-long prospective study in Germany (Study 4).

A notable strength of this set of studies is that we used diverse methods and measures including longitudinal surveys, leaderless group discussions, cynics' self-reports of power status (Study 4) as well as peers' willingness to award power to them (Study 3). However, these studies are not without limitations. We proposed that cynics' preference for dominance-based strategies of power attainment backfires and renders them less (not more) likely to actually obtain power. We showed that—of all types of power motives—cynical individuals indeed seem to be guided by dominance (and not prestige or leadership), and prior studies linked dominance with various detrimental work behaviours that likely hinder individuals' career progression (Schattke & Marion-Jetten, 2021). However, it remains to be tested whether or not cynic's preference for dominance indeed undermines their power attainment.

On a related note, we found that—besides dominance—cynicism was particularly strongly related to fear of exploitation. Potentially, the fear of being taken advantage of (that cynical views likely give rise to) triggers dominance-related behaviours in a pre-emptive strike: cynics might use dominance-based strategies to make sure others do not dare to take advantage of them. This is consistent with the literature on the evolutionary origins of dominance which serve the function of threatening and intimidating (rather than actually fighting/physically attacking) the opponent (Cheng et al., 2013). More generally, the links between fear of being exploited or losing control and the inclination to seek power and dominance have been ascertained in prior literature. For example, uncertainty about one's rank and fear of demotion can result in prioritizing the desire to maintain power, unwillingness to share it and attempts to reassert it using coercion (Deng et al., 2018; Feenstra et al., 2020; Williams, 2014).

Finally, while cynicism predicted fear of exploitation consistently across studies, its association with the overall power motive only reached significance in Study 1, but not in Study 2, where it was only associated with dominance. This discrepancy might be explained by differences between the samples (students in Study 1 vs. working adults in Study 2). For example, it is possible that the 'exploitation-reducing' aspects of power are particularly appealing to students who are just at the beginning of their careers and (about to) occupy roles at a lower organizational rank (Study 1) than to seasoned professionals (Study 2). As a result, cynicism would likely be a better predictor of the general power motive in a student sample than in an adult working sample—a pattern consistent with our data. Further, the data of Study 1 and Study 2 were collected 4 years apart, during which the COVID pandemic happened. The predictive power of personality likely depends on contextual and cultural settings (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016; Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016). Potentially, the

post-COVID era with a stronger emphasis on work-life balance and flexible work arrangements could have rendered seeking power at work less appealing to cynical individuals. Regardless of the explanation, further replication work is needed to understand whether cynicism mostly predicts specific (e.g. dominance) or also overall/general power motives.

The present research contributes to several streams of literature. First, we contribute to the question of whether 'dark' traits can contribute to success at work. A literature that is most relevant to the present investigation is the study of Machiavellianism, many conceptualizations of which include cynical and untrusting views of others (Collison et al., 2018; Dahling et al., 2008; Monaghan et al., 2020). Yet, broad conceptualizations of Machiavellianism include various other dimensions as well, such as agency and planfulness (Collison et al., 2018) or seeking control and status (Dahling et al., 2008), while more narrow conceptualizations define it as the use of deceit, manipulation and exploitation and leave cynical worldviews out of the picture (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Kessler et al., 2010). Consequently, most studies of Machiavellianism and career success do not explicitly include the dimension of cynicism and—in their theorizing—put emphasis on the role of manipulative interpersonal tactics as either leading 'high Mach' people to success or failure, an approach that provided largely mixed findings (Furnham & Treglown, 2021; Kückelhaus et al., 2021; Kückelhaus & Blickle, 2023; Paleczek et al., 2018; Spurk et al., 2016). Herein, we contribute to the study of 'dark personality' by zooming in on cynical worldviews and exploring their role in power attainment in organizations. It remains to investigate how cynicism fares relative to dark triad traits, including Machiavellianism and its various conceptualizations. Additionally, it might be worthwhile to explore the potential interplay between cynical worldviews and manipulative tactics in predicting success. For example, a recent study showed that strong political skills can allow 'high Mach' individuals to camouflage their 'dark nature' and maintain a positive reputation (Blickle et al., 2020). Similarly, it is possible that political skills or other forms of interpersonal competence can compensate for cynics' inclination to seek dominance (e.g. by correctly identifying the contexts where showing dominance is appropriate).

Second, our findings might contribute to the question of whether holding strong power motives might play a role in power attainment as well. Existing research on the associations between power motives and power attainment has not been conclusive. In contrast, individuals with a stronger desire for power tend to engage in activities that would allow them to exercise power and control others (Hofer & Busch, 2019). In an organizational context, agentic motives predict the experience of power in work settings (Locke & Heller, 2017) and career progression for women in power-relevant fields (Jenkins, 1994). Other studies, however, found no or even negative associations between power motives and success in work organizations (Apers et al., 2019; Durand, 1975; Lang et al., 2012). Are strong power motives helpful or detrimental to power attainment in cynical individuals? Herein, we have preliminary evidence suggesting that cynics' aspire to power mostly as they believe that power would help them avoid exploitation by others (Study 1) and are particularly tempted by a specific form of power—dominance (Studies 1 and 2). Potentially, the effect of power motives on power attainment depends on the type of power motive individuals have (e.g. seeking dominance might undermine power attainment while prestige or leadership facilitate it).

While we have demonstrated the negative association between cynicism and power attainment, are these associations large enough to be practically important? The size of the associations between cynicism and leadership varied considerably across the studies. For example, in the study of leaderless group discussions (Study 3), the least cynical quarter of the sample received three times as many peer nominations for a leadership role as the most cynical quarter. However, the role of cynicism in predicting leadership attainment in work organizations was considerably more modest. For example, in the longitudinal study of leadership attainment at work (Study 4), a one standard deviation higher cynicism score at study onset was associated with a 1% lower likelihood of attaining a leadership position within the following 10 years. Interestingly, even though 1% might seem small, this effect is comparable to the effects of other well-established predictors of leadership that have been widely discussed in the academic literature and the media: for example, female gender and

migration background are each associated with a 1% lower chance of leadership (Table 8). In fact, of all personality traits included in the study, only conscientiousness—a trait referred to as the most potent non-cognitive predictor of occupational success (Wilmot & Ones, 2019)—had a stronger effect (one standard deviation increase associated with a 2% higher chance of obtaining a leadership position) than cynicism.

The small effects of conscientiousness (and other Big Five traits) on power attainment could be explained by the use of a brief version of the Big Five scale in this study. These scales have been specifically designed to cover the overall breadth of the constructs for use in large-scale studies (Rammstedt & John, 2007), which might have come with a cost of lower predictive power. Alternatively, much research highlighting the predictive power of conscientiousness in prior literature has focused on other indicators of career success than the one we focused on here (promotion to a leadership role), such as occupational performance (Wilmot & Ones, 2019) or career satisfaction (Lounsbury et al., 2003). Also, several studies (Boudreau et al., 2001; Ng & Feldman, 2010) and a meta-analysis (Ng et al., 2005) have shown that when it comes to promotion, the effect of conscientiousness (as well as other Big Five traits) is substantially more modest ($r = .06$ in Ng et al., 2005) relative to subjective measures of career success, such as satisfaction. Similarly, in the present research, cynicism was a weaker predictor of the promotion likelihood (Study 4) than of being seen as an informal leader by peers (Study 3). Potentially, cynicism (and personality more generally) might be more important for leader emergence through peer nominations than for a formal leadership appointment, which is more likely to depend on one's formal qualifications and factors outside one's control (e.g. the availability of a leadership position in one's organization).

In the present research, we have demonstrated that cynicism has a prospective effect on power attainment. An equally intriguing question is whether power can shape cynicism as well. Consistent with the 'power corrupts' idea, previous research has shown that power is associated with more egocentric focus, social distance, ethically questionable behaviours and distrust in social exchange settings (e.g. negotiation tasks or monetary exchanges) (Lammers et al., 2012; Schilke et al., 2015). Other studies, on the opposite, demonstrated that power is associated with more trust in others (Lount Jr & Pettit, 2012). These mixed findings are sometimes explained by the fact that power is often conflated with status (i.e. respect and esteem by others), which (in contrast to power) has positive consequences in social exchange situations (Blader et al., 2016; Blader & Chen, 2012). Hence, power might both foster and undermine cynicism development over time depending on whether it coincides with status and respect. An equally interesting question is whether failing to attain power (e.g. being passed over for a promotion) could contribute to cynicism. Prior research has shown that experiences of disrespect represent a source of a cynical worldview (Stavrova et al., 2020); hence, as long as being denied career advancement is perceived as a sign of a lack of respect (for one's expertise, knowledge and skills), it could give rise to cynicism. We hope that future studies will explore these possibilities.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Olga Stavrova: Conceptualization; methodology; visualization; writing – original draft; data curation; project administration; formal analysis. **Daniel Ehlebracht:** Conceptualization; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Dongning Ren:** Conceptualization; methodology; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Study materials, data and scripts can be accessed at: https://osf.io/4dejt/.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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