

You raise me up and I reciprocate: Linking empowering leadership to organizational citizenship behavior and unethical pro-organizational behavior

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Abstract

Although empowering leadership is generally thought to be beneficial to employees and organizations, an emerging stream of work shows its potential negative impact. Drawing upon social exchange theory, we propose an integrated model that simultaneously examines the benefits and costs of empowering leadership. Specifically, we propose that team-level empowering leadership can relate to both organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). We also examine the mediating role of employee workplace status and the moderating role of felt obligation in these processes. Using data from 301 employees and 57 leaders across two time points, we found that team-level empowering leadership linked to leader-rated OCB and employee-rated UPB through workplace status. However, the positive indirect effect of team-level empowering leadership on OCB was significant only when employees' felt obligation was high, and the indirect effect of team-level empowering leadership on UPB was positive and significant only when employees' felt obligation was low.

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We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, as well as future research directions.

KEYWORDS

empowering leadership, felt obligation, organizational citizenship behavior, unethical pro-organizational behavior, workplace status

INTRODUCTION

For several decades, empowering leadership, defined as “a process of sharing power, allocating autonomy and responsibilities to followers, teams, or collectives through a specific set of leader behaviors for employees to enhance internal motivation and achieve work success” (Cheong et al., 2019, p. 34), has attracted considerable attention in research and practice (Ahearne et al., 2005; Dong et al., 2015). It is often viewed as an effective leadership style that links to a number of positive outcomes, such as employee satisfaction (Zhang & Bartol, 2010), work engagement (Li et al., 2021), affective commitment (Hassan et al., 2013), creativity (Dong et al., 2015; Zhang & Zhou, 2014), and work performance (Harris et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018).

However, more recently, scholars have challenged the prevailing belief that empowering leadership is uniformly beneficial and uncovered some unintended negative impact of empowering leadership on employees (Lee et al., 2018; Wong & Giessner, 2018). For instance, unregulated empowering behaviors could induce overconfidence on the part of followers, leading them to make tactical or strategic errors (Cordery et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2018). These mixed findings have prompted calls for researchers to take a more balanced view of empowering leadership and to identify the psychological processes and boundary conditions between empowering leadership and its outcomes (Cheong et al., 2019; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017). Previous research has investigated how empowering leadership links to desirable outcomes (e.g. organizational citizenship behavior, or OCB; Li et al., 2017; Raub & Robert, 2010) and undesirable outcomes (e.g. unethical pro-organizational behavior, or UPB; Zhang et al., 2021); however, what remains unclear is how such paradoxical effects of empowering leadership could result from the same leader behavior, especially how the cross-level effects of empowering leadership on individual outcomes could occur. Is there a mechanism that links empowering leadership to both positive and negative outcomes simultaneously? This is an important issue because existing research on the “dark side” of empowering leadership, although informative, has been oversimplified in its explications of the mechanisms, thus offering limited understanding of *how* it affects employees' work behaviors (Cheong et al., 2019).

Therefore, we investigate when and how empowering leadership stimulates team members' positive and negative pro-organizational behaviors (OCB and UPB). Building on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), we propose that empowering leadership links to differential employee outcomes through perceived workplace status. Djurdjevic et al. (2017) defined workplace status as an employee's perception of its relative standing at work, which is established based on higher positions, more attention and qualities in comparison to other organizational members. As empowering leaders delegate, share power and provide employees with more

autonomy in the decision-making process, employees should feel respected, prominent, and prestigious, and perceive that they have a heightened level of workplace status. Accordingly, they will repay to their organization, often by engaging in extra-role behaviors (e.g. Li et al., 2017; Schilpzand et al., 2018), even unethical extra-role behaviors (Castille et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019).

In addition, we argue that the relationships between workplace status and OCB and UPB are contingent on followers' individual differences in felt obligation (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Because there are variations in the extent to which each individual feels obligated to return to the social exchange (Clark & Mills, 1979), individuals with stronger obligations may be more likely to consider the long-term gains and benefits of the organization. Thus, employees with higher felt obligation should engage in more pro-organizational behaviors associated with gains for the organization (i.e. OCB) and less pro-organizational behaviors associated with potential long-term costs to the organization (i.e. UPB).

This research makes several important contributions to the literature. First, in response to calls for further investigation of the paradoxical nature of empowering leadership (Cheong et al., 2019), we explore the mechanism through which as well as the boundary conditions under which empowering leadership is associated with both positive and negative behaviors in followers. By introducing follower workplace status and felt obligation as key variables in the relationship between empowering leadership and discretionary behaviors (i.e. OCB and UPB), we shift the conversation from one that investigates whether empowering leadership is “good” or “bad” to one that asks *how* and *why* empowering leadership relates to positive and negative employee behaviors. Second, our study contributes to the empowering leadership literature by addressing calls for more research on the dark side of empowering leadership (Cheong et al., 2019; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). We thus contribute to a small but growing body of literature on the negative consequences of empowering leadership. Third, this study contributes to the UPB literature by considering the role of empowering leadership in such behavior. This is important because despite the buffering effects of ethical leadership (Miao et al., 2013, 2020) and transformational leadership (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Effelsberg & Solga, 2015), our understanding of what other types of leadership behaviors could lead people to engage in UPB is still limited. Our study extends research on discretionary behaviors by examining the unique influence that leadership has on the motivation to engage in UPB, as well as the mechanism and boundary conditions involved. Fourth, we contribute to research on social exchange by highlighting the crucial role that felt obligation plays in exchange processes between employees and organizations. By investigating who may exhibit more or less UPB or OCB when perceiving high workplace status, our study offers theoretical insights and practical implications regarding management interventions aimed at promoting desirable organizational behaviors and preventing questionable ones. Finally, we investigate the cross-level effects of empowering leadership on individual behaviors, which helps us to understand the “trickle-down” effects of empowerment directed at teams to employees behaviors (Li et al., 2017). With this, we also extend Zhang et al. (2021) and make a methodological contribution by incorporating cross-level analyses to explore the influence of team-level empowering leadership on individual-level UPB, and advance the knowledge with regards to the cross-level correlates of UPB (Mo et al., *in press*). Figure 1 presents the theoretical model.

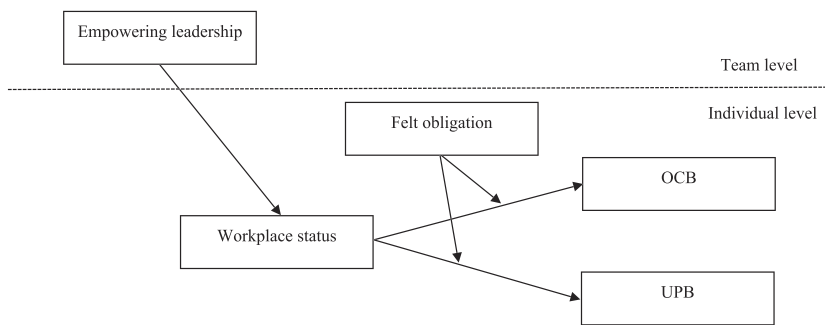


FIGURE 1 Theoretical model. *Note:* OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Empowering leadership, workplace status, and employee behaviors

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that reciprocal relationships are established through the exchange of resources. When one party provides benefits to the other party, the latter reciprocates with benefits in return. Building on this theory, employees are motivated to engage in behaviors that benefit their organization as a response to positive treatment from their supervisors or the organization itself. Empowering leaders develop exchange relationships with their subordinates by delegating power and control to them; followers are likely to reciprocate this favorable treatment by engaging in behaviors that are beneficial to the organization (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017), even if some such behaviors might be unethical.

Consistent with previous empowering leadership researchers (e.g. Li et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2013), we consider empowering leadership as an ambient, team-directed stimulus affecting all members of a leader's unit. In other words, we propose that members within the same team share similar perceptions regarding the extent to which their leader exhibits empowering leadership behaviors. Hence, we expect members of the same group (individuals who report to the same leader) to have more similar leadership perceptions than the members of different groups. In this approach, team-level leadership refers to “the overall pattern of leadership behaviors displayed to the entire business unit; it can be viewed as a type of ‘ambient stimulus’ that pervade the work unit and are shared among the unit members (Hackman, 1992)” (Liao & Chuang, 2007: 1007). Empowering leaders enhance team members' group identity by increasing both their pride in the membership, their security about membership in a group and their status within the group.

Workplace status is an employee's relative standing compared to other organizational members in the work context, as characterized by the respect, prominence, and prestige the employee possesses (Djurdjevic et al., 2017). One's workplace status is inherently relative to others. Specifically, one cannot have absolute status, as it does not exist independently of others, and individuals are aware of their own and others' standing within status hierarchies (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Team-directed empowering leadership can enhance team members' perceived workplace status for several reasons. First, because team-directed empowering leaders delegate power and responsibilities from team level to followers and create an autonomous team environment that allows the latter to participate in decision-making and fulfill their

responsibilities on their own, team members are likely to feel trusted and *respected* by their leaders and organizations (Ahearne et al., 2005; Tekleab et al., 2008), as compared to other out-team members. Second, team-directed empowering leadership behaviors propel team members to believe that they have a positive relationship with their leaders and receive favorable treatment from the leaders and the organizations they represent (Hassan et al., 2013). Through team members' interaction and communication, empowerment from team leaders will enhance team members' shared recognition about their value in the organization compared with members outside their teams. Consequently, team members' sense of impact in their organizations will be enhanced. In this vein, empowering leadership enables in-team members to experience a sense of *prominence*, as compared to out-team colleagues. Finally, empowering leadership also augments team members' perception of workplace status through enhancing their feelings of *prestige*. According to Anderson and Kilduff (2009), prestige is formed based on the qualities that can contribute to organizational success, such as resources, commitment, and competence. As empowering leaders share resources, including power, decision-making authority, control, and responsibility, with their team members (Harris et al., 2014; Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017; Spreitzer, 1995), followers are likely to feel that they have more competence and impact in the team compared with members from other teams (Martin et al., 2013; Raub & Robert, 2010), generating a sense of prestige. Taken together, the enhanced sense of respect, prominence and prestige will enable team members with a higher level of empowering leadership to perceive a higher relative standing within the organization after making comparisons with other organizational members. We therefore propose the following:

Hypothesis 1. There is a positive cross-level relationship between empowering leadership and employee workplace status.

We further argue that after receiving favorable treatment from their empowering leaders, employees will be motivated to reciprocate by exhibiting OCB and UPB. OCB refers to an individual's discretionary behavior that is not directly or explicitly defined in their formal job responsibilities, and that can facilitate the effective functioning of the organization (Organ, 1988; Wang et al., 2005). UPB, on the other hand, refers to "actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct" (Umphress & Bingham, 2011, p. 622). While these behaviors are both intended to give back to leaders, coworkers, or the organization in some way, they are manifested differently. For example, an employee may engage in OCB by volunteering to work on a special project or mentor a new hire. On the other hand, an employee may engage in UPB by lying to protect their company's image.

There are good reasons to expect a positive relationship between workplace status and OCB. First, Korman (1970) suggested that employees tend to perform behaviors that are consistent with their self-perceptions and evaluations. Based on this, Van Dyne et al. (2000) maintained that because engaging in OCB can reinforce one's positive sense of self, employees with more positive self-perceptions are more likely to contribute to their organization. If individuals perceive that they have gained a relatively high status, their positive sense of impact and importance will likely motivate them to contribute to the organization beyond their role-prescribed behaviors. Second, as high-status members are equipped with more advantages and resources (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Piazza & Castellucci, 2014; Ravlin & Thomas, 2005), their perception of possessing higher status at work nurtures a prosocial motivation to support and contribute to the goals of the organization (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2002). Indeed, van Dijke et al. (2012)

found that self-perceived status resulting from procedural justice will motivate employees to go above and beyond and exhibit extra-role behaviors. To sum up, employees with higher perceptions of their workplace status are more likely to engage in OCB.

On the other hand, we argue that high workplace status will lead to a form of immoral but pro-organizational behavior: UPB. UPB consists of two critical elements. First, it is a type of unethical behavior that is morally unacceptable based on societal norms. Second, it is a behavior that is intended to benefit the organization (Chen et al., 2016; Mo et al., *in press*). Examples of UPB include withholding negative information about company products or manipulating numbers in order to enhance a company's public image. According to Umphress and Bingham (2011), under the influence of social exchange norms, individuals may view UPB as a legitimate way to reciprocate positive social exchange from their employer. In other words, to repay the positive treatment they have received—namely, the perceived high workplace status that empowering leadership provides—employees are more likely to be motivated to engage in UPB. In addition, past research has suggested that those with high status are less attentive to moral issues and are unable to self-regulate in order to inhibit their unethical tendencies (Galperin et al., 2011; Pettit et al., 2016). As a result, strong motivations to reciprocate may drive high-status employees to override their personal ethical standards and values and engage in behaviors that ostensibly benefit the organization. This is consistent with previous research that has cautioned about the potential dark side of status (Sharkey, 2018). Research has found that to maintain their current status people are more likely to cheat and status can promote unethical behaviors (Pettit et al., 2016). In summary, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2a. There is a positive indirect effect of empowering leadership on OCB via employee workplace status.

Hypothesis 2b. There is a positive indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB via employee workplace status.

The moderating role of felt obligation

Although we propose that workplace status links to employees' OCB and UPB, individual differences might also play a pivotal role in this relationship. In other words, we contend that not every employee with high status will engage in OCB and UPB as a return of positive social exchange to the organization; individuals may act differently to reciprocate their organizations' favorable treatment and resources, due to individual differences (Ladebo, 2010). Building on social exchange theory, we further propose that felt obligation, a self-view regarding the responsibility to an organization, is a key individual difference in determining when workplace status is related to OCB or UPB. Felt obligation is a prescriptive belief regarding whether individuals should care about an organization's development and help it to achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001). The core essence of felt obligation has been recognized as a morality-based belief that reveals employees' ethical principles regarding whether they should engage in exchange relationships with their organizations (Paillé & Valéau, 2020). Further, felt obligation not only entails employees' sense of responsibility toward stakeholders inside organizations, but also concerns the benefits and satisfaction of stakeholders outside them. People with high felt obligation have a strong belief in contributing to their organizations' long-term success and ensuring that their customers are well served and satisfied (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2006).

Felt obligation may influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and react to their status in organizations, thereby affecting the relationship between workplace status and OCB. Based on social exchange theory, employees with higher felt obligation tend to regard heightened status as a positive treatment provided by their organization; they will thus be encouraged to reciprocate the positive resources and evaluation they receive from their organization regardless of situation (Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Roch et al., 2019). Accordingly, these employees are more likely to be willing to engage in extra-role activities (e.g. assisting their coworkers, putting forward suggestions, and working with a sense of responsibility) as a response to their high status in the work group (Liang et al., 2012; Zhu & Akhtar, 2019). In this sense, along with high work status, employees who feel highly obligated to reciprocate will exhibit higher levels of OCB than those with low work status. Furthermore, because felt obligation enables employees to overcome barriers or obstacles in order to adjust their behaviors to be aligned with their organization's long-term success (Fuller et al., 2006), employees with higher felt obligation and low workplace status will be more motivated to engage in OCB than those with lower felt obligation. In contrast, employees with lower felt obligation lack the motivation to offer advice and assistance that could help their organization become more effective and feel less responsible for the organization's development and success (Zhu & Akhtar, 2019). As a result, they will be less likely to be influenced by managerial attempts to elicit OCB through elevating their perceived workplace status (Morrison et al., 2011). This undesirable situation (i.e. low felt obligation) decreases the extent to which employees view exchange relationships as valuable assets and reduces the possibility of even high-status employees exhibiting OCB. Furthermore, engaging in OCB may involve potential individual resource (e.g. time and energy) consuming (Koopman et al., 2016), those who possess low workplace status will thus be very reluctant to go beyond their formal work roles and engage in OCB. In summary, the relationship between workplace status and OCB is strengthened when felt obligation is higher.

We further maintain that employees' sense of obligation will also be relevant in the relationship between workplace status and UPB. Individuals who have high felt obligation are more concerned with the long-term development of their organizations and are more sensitive to their reputations (Babalola et al., 2021; Eisenberger et al., 2001). They also care about the interests of their customers and about creating value for different stakeholders. These employees are motivated to reciprocate their organizations' favorable treatment with a sense of moral responsibility (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Indeed, their feelings of obligation motivate these employees to help their organizations achieve their goals ethically (Hannah et al., 2014; Ogunfowora et al., 2021). Therefore, employees with high felt obligation are less likely to justify UPB, as such behaviors could have detrimental effects on an organization in the long run (e.g. damage to an organizational image if such actions are noticed by customers). As pointed out by Umphress et al. (2010, p. 770), "although employees may try to help organizations by engaging in UPB, the final result of their actions may deviate from their intentions and may ultimately cause harm." Given that such unethical behaviors are intended to benefit organizations, but may involve damaging their reputations and (for example) lying to customers (Umphress & Bingham, 2011), employees with high felt obligation might be less motivated to reciprocate their endowed workplace status by engaging in UPB, as their personal responsibility for their organization regulates and restrains such behaviors (Cheng et al., 2021; Eisenberger et al., 2001). On the contrary, when employees have low felt obligation, they are less concerned with the reputation and continuous development of their organizations. This is especially the case for those with high workplace status. As such, these employees are more likely to be encouraged by high workplace status to exhibit UPB, as they show less sensitivity to moral responsibilities and are motivated to

maintain their own benefits (e.g. their status) (Lorinkova & Perry, 2019). In addition, given its unethical nature, UPB will trigger a feeling of guilt (Tang et al., 2020), with low felt obligation, employees are more likely to engage in UPB than those with high felt obligation as they are less likely to feel guilty. Thus, we argue that highly entitled employees may be more willing to engage in UPB from a desire to achieve high status. Consequently, employees with low felt obligation but high workplace status might actively justify their unethical behaviors as being beneficial for their organization; for instance, they might believe that they are being a “loyal team member” (Keem et al., 2018). To summarize, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 3a. Employee felt obligation moderates the relationship between workplace status and employee OCB, such that the relationship is more positive for employees whose felt obligation is higher.

Hypothesis 3b. Employee felt obligation moderates the relationship between workplace status and employee UPB, such that the relationship is less positive for employees whose felt obligation is higher.

The integrated model

The arguments behind Hypothesis 1 indicate that empowering leadership will boost employees' workplace status in terms of respect, prominence, and prestige. Further, the theorizing behind Hypothesis 3a suggests that high (vs. low) levels of felt obligation fuel employees' high status (which is elevated by empowering leadership) and motivate them to repay their organizations by engaging in OCB. On the other hand, a sense of high felt obligation constrains employees to help promote organizational goals ethically; it therefore reduces the possibility of translating high workplace status (induced by empowering leadership) into UPB. To summarize, felt obligation has the potential to moderate the indirect effect of empowering leadership on employees' OCB and UPB through workplace status, thereby demonstrating a pattern of moderated mediation. Therefore, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 4a. Employee felt obligation moderates the indirect effect of empowering leadership on employee OCB via workplace status, such that the effect is more positive for employees whose felt obligation is higher.

Hypothesis 4b. Employee felt obligation moderates the indirect effect of empowering leadership on employee UPB via workplace status, such that the effect is less positive for employees whose felt obligation is higher.

METHOD

Sample and procedure

We collected data from 70 leaders and 500 team members in 70 work teams in a real estate company in eastern China. One of the authors contacted the manager of the company through their personal professional network and explained the purpose of the survey. The manager then

helped us to randomly select available teams (with a guarantee of at least three employees in each team) to participate in the study. Survey questionnaires were distributed to all team members and their leaders in small groups during a specially scheduled period coordinated by the human resource management department. The average number of subordinates working under a leader's supervision was 7.14. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their participation. To reduce common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we sent surveys at two measurement time points. At Time 1, employees reported their leaders' levels of empowering leadership. The second survey was carried out 1 month later (Time 2). Employees assessed their own workplace status, felt obligation, and UPB; and team leaders answered questions regarding team-level human resource practices and employees' engagement in OCB. A total of 62 supervisors and 380 employees responded. Of these employees, 79 were excluded from further analyses (61 of them could not be matched to leaders, and 18 did not return complete surveys). The final matched sample consisted of 301 employees (response rate = 71.67%), along with 57 supervisors (response rate = 81.41%). The average number of members in each team was 5.28. Among the employees, 49.17% were male; the mean age was 30.66 years ($SD = 7.85$), with ages ranging from 18 to 64 years. Most of the employees (77%) held a college degree or above. Among the leaders, the mean age was 37.75 years, 59.65% were male, and 90.05% had a college degree or above.

Measures

All measures used in the current study were translated from English to Chinese following Brislin's (1986) standard back-translated procedure. We used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree."

Empowering leadership (employee-rated)

We measured employee perceived leader's empowering behavior with the 12-item scale developed by Ahearne et al. (2005), which has been validated in the Chinese context (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which the items could best describe their leader's behaviors. Sample items include "my leader helps me understand how my objectives and goals relate to that of the company" and "my leader helps me understand the importance of my work to the overall effectiveness of the company." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .92. Because employees were nested in leaders, empowering leadership was aggregated to the team-level (Chan, 1998). To justify the aggregation, within team agreement was obtained by using a rectangular distribution and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) values (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). The high mean of r_{wg} value was .97 (James et al., 1993), the intraclass correlation (ICC1) was .38, and the reliability of group mean (ICC2) was .75, providing support for aggregation (Bliese, 2000).

Workplace status (employee-rated)

To assess employee perceived workplace status, we used the 5-item scale from Djurdjevic et al. (2017). Sample items are "I have a great deal of prestige in my organization" and "I possess a high level of prominence in my organization". The Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Felt obligation (employee-rated)

We measured felt obligation using Eisenberger et al. (2001) seven-item scale (e.g. “I owe it to the organization to do what I can to ensure that customers are well-served and satisfied” and “I have an obligation to the organization to ensure that I produce high-quality work”). The Cronbach's alpha was .92.

OCB (leader-rated)

We used the 9-item scale developed by Farh et al. (2007) to measure OCB in the Chinese context. We asked the leaders to evaluate the extent to which these statements could best describe their team members' behaviors. Sample items are “willing to offer assistance to coworkers to solve work-related problems” and “works diligently and with a great sense of responsibility even when work outcomes will not count toward one's performance evaluation.” The Cronbach's alpha was .87.

UPB (employee-rated)

UPB was measured by using the 6-item scale developed by Umphress et al. (2010). Sample items are “if it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good” and “if it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients.” The coefficient alpha was .93.

Control variables

Demographic variables (e.g. gender, age, and education) were controlled for their potential impact on employee OCB and UPB (Allen, 2006). Gender was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female. Education was coded as 1 = professional college diploma and below, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = master's degree, and 4 = doctor's degree and above. In addition, we controlled for human resource management practices (15-item scale from Xiao & Björkman, 2006, $\alpha = .81$) because previous studies had found human resource practices significantly affected employee OCB (Lin et al., 2014). Because some coefficients of the paths linking these control variables to the mediator and dependent variables were significant, we followed the advice of Becker (2005) and retained these variables in our model, although the findings and the conclusion do not change if they are dropped from the model.¹

Analytic strategy

We first performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) in Mplus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to examine the discriminant validity of the main variables in the model (empowering leadership, workplace status, felt obligation, OCB and UPB). Because the ratio of sample size to parameters was below the recommended value of 5 (Bentler & Chou, 1987), we

created item parcels before conducting CFA. Specifically, we followed Landis et al.'s (2000) method to create parcels for workplace status, felt obligation, and UPB. We conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with a single-factor solution was specified. Then, we assigned the items with the highest factor loading to the first parcel, the second highest loading to the second parcel, and back and forth until all items were assigned to form two balanced parcels. In addition, based on the theoretical dimensions of empowering leadership and OCB, we conducted the second-order CFA of empowering leadership and OCB, respectively. We tested a five-factor model against four alternative models. Building on these results, the second set of analyses was conducted to test our hypotheses using hierarchical linear modeling in HLM 7 (Raudenbush et al., 2011). Given the cross-level nature of our model, we tested whether there were significant variances between the groups to justify the use of multilevel modeling by calculating the intraclass coefficients [i.e. ICC (1) and ICC (2)] for workplace status, OCB and UPB (Bliese, 2000). We found that the ICCs (1) for workplace status, OCB, and, UPB were .19, .56, and .34, respectively; the ICCs (2) for workplace status, OCB, and UPB were .54, .86, and .72, respectively, indicating that adequate amount of variances for workplace status, OCB and UPB resided at the team level; this provided justifications of the use of multilevel analyses.

RESULT

Discriminant validity

Table 1 shows the results of several measurement models tested in our CFA. The results indicated that the hypothesized five-factor model fits the data well, χ^2 (307) = 709.62, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06, CFI = .91, TLI = .90. Against this baseline model, the best alternative model (with workplace status and felt obligation loaded onto one factor) had a poorer fit (χ^2 [311] = 1101.92, RMSEA = .09; SRMR = .08; CFI = .82; TLI = .79) when compared to our baseline model ($\Delta\chi^2$ [4] = 392.3, $p < .01$). Thus, the variables displayed adequate discriminant validity among study variables.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 displays means, standard deviations, and correlations among our variables. Hypothesis 1 predicted that empowering leadership would be positively related to workplace status. As shown in Model 2 of Table 3, after controlling for employees' gender, age, education and human resource practices, empowering leadership was positively related to employee workplace status ($\gamma = .35$, $p < .01$), thus Hypothesis 1 was supported.

We hypothesized that workplace status would mediate the relationships between empowering leadership and OCB (H2a) and UPB (H2b). Results are presented in Table 3 show that employee workplace status was positively related to OCB ($b = .07$, $p < .05$; Model 3 of Table 3) and UPB ($b = .35$, $p < .01$; Model 5 of Table 3). In addition, we calculated the 95% intervals (CI) generated by 10,000 bootstrap samples for the indirect effect using Monte Carlo method in R (Selig & Preacher, 2008). These results are presented in Table 4. The 95% CI for the indirect effect of empowering leadership on OCB through employee workplace status was [.002, .06], excluding zero. Similarly, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB via

TABLE 1 Confirmatory factor analysis results

Model	$\chi^2(df)$	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
Model 1: Five factors	709.62 (307)		.07	.06	.91	.90
Model 2: Four factors	1101.92 (311)	392.3** (4)	.09	.08	.82	.79
Model 3: Three factors	1359.35 (314)	646.73** (7)	.11	.14	.76	.73
Model 4: Two factors	1739.85 (320)	1030.23** (13)	.12	.09	.67	.64
Model 5: One factor	2617.64 (324)	1908.02** (17)	.15	.15	.47	.42

Note: $N = 301$. CFI = comparative fit index; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root-mean-squared residual; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior. Model 1: Baseline five-factor model with empowering leadership, workplace status, felt obligation, OCB and UPB loaded on their respective factors. Model 2: Four-factor model with workplace status and felt obligation loaded onto one factor. Model 3: Three-factor model with workplace status, felt obligation and UPB loaded onto one factor. Model 4: Two-factor model with empowering leadership, workplace status, felt obligation and UPB loaded the other factor. Model 5: One-factor model with all variables loaded onto one factor.

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviation, and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Team level									
1. Gender	0.40	.50	(—)						
2. Age	37.75	7.31	-.05	(—)					
3. Education	2.11	.56	.04	-.08	(—)				
4. Empowering leadership	4.05	.34	-.10	-.11	.03	(.92)			
5. HRM	3.70	.50	-.09	-.44**	-.31*	-.06	(.81)		
Employee level									
1. Gender	.51	.50	(—)						
2. Age	30.66	7.85	.83	(—)					
3. Education	1.86	.55	-.01	-.10	(—)				
4. Workplace status	3.40	.67	.001	.01	.12*	(.81)			
5. Felt obligation	4.15	.51	.13*	.17**	-.02	.11	(.92)		
6. UPB	2.26	.97	-.22**	-.06	-.04	.24**	-.26*	(.93)	
7. OCB	3.95	.51	.01	-.10	.02	.07	.11	-.00	(.87)

Note: $N = 301$ employees in 57 teams. HRM = human resource management practices; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior. Cronbachs alphas appear in parentheses on the diagonal. Gender: 0 = male and 1 = female. Education: 1 = professional college diploma and below, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = master's degree, and 4 = doctors degree and above.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

workplace status was also significant (95% CI = [.03, .25]). In summary, these results provided support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b proposed that employee felt obligation moderated the effects of workplace status on employee OCB and UPB. We examined these hypotheses by adding an

TABLE 3 Multilevel path analysis results

Variables	Workplace status		OCB		UPB	
	Model 1 γ (SE)	Model 2 γ (SE)	Model 3 γ (SE)	Model 4 γ (SE)	Model 5 γ (SE)	Model 6 γ (SE)
Intercept	3.43***(.05)	3.42***(.05)	4.01***(.05)	4.00***(.05)	2.23***(.07)	2.26***(.07)
Individual level						
Gender	-.01(.07)	-.03(.07)	.01(.04)	.00(.04)	-.20(.08)	-.20(.08)
Age	.01(.01)	.01(.01)	.00(.01)	-.00(.02)	-.00(.01)	-.00(.01)
Education	.18(.08)	.17(.08)	.05(.05)	.06(.05)	-.13(.08)	-.14(.08)
Workplace status			.07*(.03)	.01(.03)	.35**(.11)	.35***(.10)
Felt obligation				.10(.06)		-.36**(.11)
Workplace status * felt obligation				.12*(.06)		-.30**(.09)
Team level						
HRM	.01(.09)	.06(.10)	.39***(.11)	.51***(.09)	.16(.12)	.07(.11)
Empowering leadership		.35**(.12)	.24(.13)	.19(.12)	-.29(.15)	-.21(.18)
$R^2_{\text{between-group}}$	.25	.33	.00	.00	.00	.00
$R^2_{\text{within-group}}$	.11	.00	.00	.18	.13	.06

Note: $N = 301$ employees in 57 teams. HRM = human resource management practices; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior. Gender: 0 = male and 1 = female. Education: 1 = professional college diploma and below, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = master's degree, and 4 = doctors degree and above.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

interaction term of workplace status and felt obligation into the model. To improve the interpretation of the results (Cohen et al., 2003; Dalal & Zickar, 2012), workplace status and felt obligation were grand-mean centered before the moderation analysis. As indicated in Model 4 and Model 6 in Table 3, the interaction effect between employee workplace status and felt obligation was significant on OCB ($b = .12, p < .05$) and UPB ($b = -.30, p < .01$). We plotted the relationships between workplace status and OCB and UPB at high and low levels of employee felt obligation (1 SD above and below the mean). In Figure 2, the results of simple slope tests showed that the effect of employee workplace status on OCB was positive and significant when employee felt obligation was high ($b = .10, p < .05$). However, when felt obligation was low, the effect was not significant ($b = -.03, n.s.$). Thus, Hypothesis 3a was supported. Also, as Figure 3 reveals, the effect of employee workplace status on UPB was positive and significant only when employee felt obligation was lower ($b = .50, p < .1$) but was not significant when employee felt obligation was higher ($b = .19, n.s.$). Hence, Hypothesis 3b was also supported.

For Hypotheses 4a and 4b (i.e. felt obligation moderates the indirect effects of empowering leadership on OCB and UPB via workplace status), we followed a Monte Carlo-based resampling approach in R ($N = 10,000$; Selig & Preacher, 2008) to calculate the 95% CIs for the conditional indirect effects. As shown in Table 4, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on OCB via workplace status was significant in the condition of high employee felt obligation

TABLE 4 Results of indirect and conditional indirect effects

Outcome	Mediator: Workplace status	a-path	b-path	Indirect effect	95% CI of indirect effect
OCB		.35**	.07*	.03	[.002, .06]
UPB		.35**	.35**	.12	[.03, .25]
Outcome	Moderator: Felt obligation	a-path	b-path	Indirect effect	95% CI of indirect effect
OCB	Low (−1 SD)	.35**	.03	.02	[−.04, .04]
	High (+1 SD)	.35**	.10*	.05	[.02, .13]
	Difference (low vs. high)			.03	[.01, .13]
UPB	Low (−1 SD)	.35**	.41**	.21	[.07, .40]
	High (+1 SD)	.35**	.17	.09	[−.04, .25]
	Difference (low vs. high)			−.12	[−.26, −.01]

Note: $N = 301$ employees in 57 teams. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

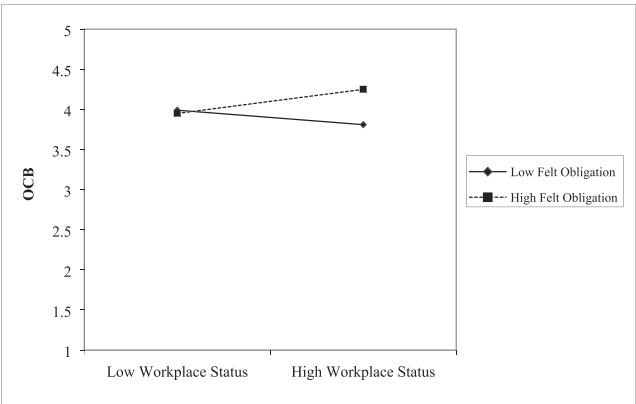


FIGURE 2 The interactive effect of workplace status and felt obligation on OCB. Note: OCB = organizational citizenship behavior

(indirect effect = .04, 95% CI = [.01, .10]) but was not significant when employee felt obligation was low (indirect effect = −.01, 95% CI = [−.03, .04]). The difference between the two conditional indirect effects was also significant (Δ indirect effect = .05, 95% CI = [.0003, .10]). Thus, Hypothesis 4a was supported. In addition, the result reveals that the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB via workplace status was positive and significant (indirect effect = .18, 95% CI = [.05, .33]) when employee felt obligation was low, but was not significant when employee felt obligation was high (indirect effect = .07, 95% CI = [−.01, .18]). The difference between the two conditional indirect effects was also significant (Δ indirect effect = .11, 95% CI = [−.21, −.03]). Therefore, Hypothesis 4b was supported. In summary, all hypotheses were supported.

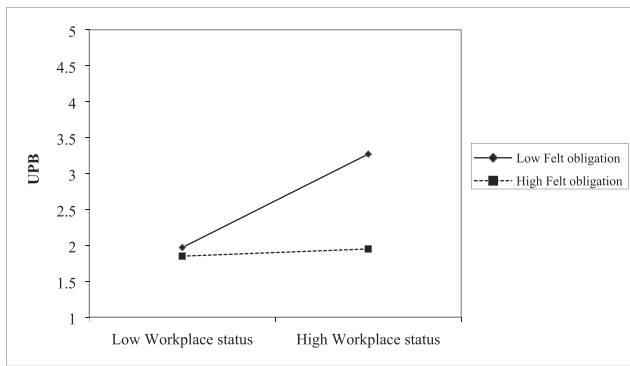


FIGURE 3 The interactive effect of workplace status and felt obligation on UPB. *Note:* UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior

Supplementary analyses

Previous research has suggested that there might be a curvilinear effect of empowering leadership on its outcomes, as empowering leaders might provide subordinates with autonomy by delegating too much power and control to them, which may elicit a loss of efficiency due to lack of regulation (Cordery et al., 2010) based on a performance-focused perspective. The curvilinear effect of empowering leadership (e.g. Lee et al., 2017) is primarily based on the tenets that too much empowerment (1) signals that the leader is not involved or interested in the task or that the task itself is not important, which decreases employees' motivation to invest efforts into the task; (2) places additional burden on the employees as it forces employees to express ideas or opinions; (3) distracts employees from focusing on the task but on relationship building. Accordingly, we tested the potential curvilinear relationship between empowering leadership and workplace status. As shown in Table 5, after entering the quadratic term of empowering leadership, the coefficient of squared empowering leadership on workplace status was not significant ($b = .28, n.s.$). Therefore, the curvilinear relationship between empowering leadership and workplace status was not found. The results are aligned with the prior empowering leadership research drawing on a social exchange perspective, which has consistently suggested that empowering leadership should initiate a positive exchange relationship between the leader and the empowered followers. As a result, followers are likely to experience higher level of workplace status and reciprocate this favorable treatment.

DISCUSSION

Answering recent calls for further investigation of the bright and dark sides of empowering leadership (Cheong et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017; Lorinkova et al., 2013), our paper explores the conditions that contribute to the paradoxical nature of this leadership style. To accomplish this, we utilized social exchange theory to predict that workplace status mediates the relationships between empowering leadership and OCB and UPB. In a sample of 301 Chinese employees and their 57 leaders, we found support for our hypotheses that employees who perceived an increase in their own workplace status due to empowering leadership would reciprocate this in the form

TABLE 5 Test of the curvilinear relationship between empowering leadership and workplace status

Variables	Workplace status		
	Model 1 γ (SE)	Model 2 γ (SE)	Model 3 γ (SE)
Intercept	3.40**(.05)	3.40**(.05)	3.41**(.05)
Individual level			
Gender	.03(.08)	.04(.07)	.04(.07)
Age	.01(.01)	.01(.01)	.01(.01)
Education	.17(.10)	.14(.10)	.15(.10)
Team level			
HRM	.02(.10)	.04(.10)	.01(.10)
Empowering leadership		.50***(.12)	−1.81(1.35)
Empowering leadership ²			.28(.18)
$R^2_{\text{between-group}}$	.00	.34	.08
$R^2_{\text{within-group}}$	.04	.00	.00

Note: HRM = human resource management practices.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

of OCB and UPB. Further, we found that employees' felt obligation moderated the effects of workplace status on OCB and UPB, such that individuals with high felt obligation showed a more positive relationship between workplace status and OCB and a less positive relationship between workplace status and UPB. These findings have implications for both theory and practice.

Theoretical implications

First, this paper deepens our understanding of empowering leadership and how it influences employee behaviors. Prior studies on the relationships between empowering leadership and employee outcomes have been inconclusive (Cheong et al., 2016; Wong & Giessner, 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2014), and more exploration is needed to identify the boundaries in these relationships. Our work supports this endeavor by demonstrating that the relationships between empowering leadership and discretionary behaviors are impacted by follower status and felt obligation. Moreover, these findings suggest that both positive and negative discretionary behaviors can result from actions taken by the same leader. In this way, our work extends our current understanding of the complex effects of empowering leadership by shifting the focus from investigating whether empowering leadership is “good” or “bad” for employees to examine *how* and *why* such divergent effects could result from the same leader.

Second, we contribute to previous work by providing an alternative theoretical explanation for the link between empowering leadership and its negative outcomes. Prior research in this area has found that empowering leadership can be linked to unintended negative consequences such as increased work tension and decreased in-role and extra-role performance (Cheong et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2014). Our study expands this area of research by revealing that

empowering leadership can relate to UPB through workplace status. In addition, we find that under certain conditions (e.g. low felt obligation), employees who are empowered with higher workplace status may engage in unethical behaviors in an effort to reciprocate the empowerment they receive. Notably, empowering leadership has been shown to relate to UPB (Zhang et al., 2021). While the essential research question in Zhang et al. (2021) regard how empowering leadership affects UPB (i.e. the dark side of empowering leadership), we extend this line of research by focusing on the research question of how empowering leadership leads to both UPB and OCB (i.e. co-existing bright and dark sides). This focus is important because understanding the paradoxical effects of empowering leadership is vital in advancing the empowering leadership literature (Cheong et al., 2019). Future studies may consider other plausible negative consequences and alternative mechanisms of empowering leadership, understanding of which would supplement our knowledge about the potential downsides of empowering leadership. In addition, when leaders engage in too much empowering behavior to their subordinates, they may signal to employees that the task or the authority is not important, decreasing employees' willingness to concentrate on their work (Lee et al., 2017). Thus, there may be potential curvilinear relationship between empowering leadership and employee positive behaviors. Future research should further explore the "Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing" effects of empowering leadership.

Third, by exploring the unique conditions under which empowering leadership is associated with UPB, we contribute to the literature on UPB by extending the understanding of its antecedents. Although research into leadership's role in motivating employees to engage in UPB is growing (Effelsberg et al., 2014; Effelsberg & Solga, 2015; Graham et al., 2015; Miao et al., 2020), our understanding of which types of leader behaviors induce UPB is still limited. Prior research suggests that empowering leadership tends to be a stronger predictor of extra-role behaviors after controlling for other leadership styles (Lee et al., 2018). Our findings add to this area of research by demonstrating that empowering leadership contributes to the motivation to engage in UPB. Whereas previous research with a social exchange perspective suggests that it is the duty orientation (i.e. duty to members, mission, or codes) that propels employees to engage in UPB (Zhang et al., 2021), we provide an alternative theoretical account by highlighting how workplace status may enable UPB. In addition, we demonstrate that workplace status mediates the positive relationship between empowering leadership and UPB when employee felt obligation is low. In doing so, we identify conditions under which empowering leaders may influence employees to engage in unethical behaviors for the benefit of the organization.

Finally, this research contributes to social exchange theory by emphasizing the essential roles of employees' felt obligation in the exchange processes between employees and their organizations. Our findings suggest that felt obligation relates to employees' desire to engage in social exchange behaviors that would help their organizations achieve their goals. While previous research has adopted a social exchange framework to explain employees' positive attitudes and behaviors in response to benefits they receive from organizations (e.g. Li et al., 2017), less attention has been given to negative behavioral outcomes in response to such benefits. This study therefore adds to the literature by revealing that the combination of an employee's status and felt obligation is critical in determining whether they repay their organization with positive or negative discretionary behaviors. In so doing, our study extends the research by parsing out the nuances of the exchange relationships between empowering leaders and their followers. Future research could build on our findings to investigate whether felt obligation can play a critical role in determining other types of leadership behaviors and employees' extra-role behaviors.

Practical implications

Our findings also have several practical implications for organizations. Most importantly, by indicating the conditions under which empowering leadership may induce positive or negative employee behaviors, we provide insight to managers regarding potential outcomes of empowering behaviors. Specifically, empowering leadership will likely link to more positive behavior (OCB) and less negative behavior (UPB) when employees have a high sense of obligation toward the organization. This is consistent with the viewpoint of Argyris (1998), who encouraged managers to be realistic about the limits of empowering leadership and cognizant of the ways in which it achieves positive effects. We argue that managers should be mindful that empowering leadership may result in both positive and negative employee behaviors. By building this awareness, managers may be able to identify (and possibly prevent) UPB from their followers.

In addition, team leaders should pay careful attention to the influence of empowering leadership. Cordery et al. (2010) found that in conditions of task uncertainty, teams empowered with high autonomy tend to have higher levels of performance than those with low autonomy. However, our study demonstrates that individual differences (i.e. levels of felt obligation) influence the relationship between empowering leadership and individual behaviors. Thus, team leaders should be careful not to assume that empowering behaviors will affect individual team members uniformly. Instead, leaders ought to consider that for certain objectives, empowerment may be more effective when it is differentially targeted at individuals, rather than universally targeted toward a team.

Finally, this research has important implications for human resource managers who train employees on ethical behaviors. Because UPB can have significantly detrimental impacts on organizations in the long-term (Umphress & Bingham, 2011), human resource managers can use the findings from our study to discourage employees from engaging in these behaviors. We found evidence to support a pattern of social exchange wherein employees engage in UPB in response to status received from empowering leaders. This suggests that human resource managers should train employees on appropriate ways to give back to their organization as well as the ways that UPB can actually harm organizations in the long-term. By understanding the cognitive underpinnings of felt obligation and social exchange, human resource professionals can tailor education and training programs to discourage unethical behaviors and encourage desired behaviors.

Limitations and future research

Though our findings have significant implications for researchers and practitioners, we recognize that our study is not without limitations. First, the study identifies two variables (workplace status and felt obligation) play critical roles in explaining how and why empowering leadership often has paradoxical outcomes. However, our findings are certainly not exhaustive. Future research should explore additional mechanisms by which empowering leaders impact employee behavior. This is an area where applying new theoretical perspectives could be particularly fruitful. For example, future researchers could apply a challenge-hindrance framework (LePine et al., 2005) to explore the ways in which perceptions of empowering leadership may cause employees to feel either bolstered or burdened by their newfound empowerment.

A second limitation is that our study was entirely conducted within a single cultural context, as data were collected from participants in China. Thus, it is unclear whether these findings

extend to other cultural contexts, such as global teams and other cross-cultural dyads. Cultural dimensions, such as the power distance between leaders and followers, could potentially influence the magnitude of an employee's felt obligation to their organization, as well as their experience of empowerment (Hofstede, 1984). Thus, future research could extend our findings to determine how cultural factors impact the outcomes of empowering leadership. For example, do employees in high-power-distance countries feel more obligation to engage in social exchange behaviors in order to repay the empowerment they receive from their leaders? Do individuals on cross-cultural teams have unique reactions to empowering behaviors from global leaders?

Finally, although we collected data from two sources and at two time points, we were still not able to establish evidence of causal relationships in our model or rule out the presence of reciprocal relationships between the variables (e.g. empowering leadership and OCB/UPB may have reciprocal relationships) without them being repeatedly measured. However, we believe utilizing time separation (i.e. two waves of data) and using an alternative source (i.e. including leader-rated OCB) can, at least to some extent, serve as a control for some sources of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003, 2012). The findings from our time-lagged data can provide value in establishing the initial relationships among the variables, setting the basic building blocks of testing this mediation model for future research. In addition, the directions of the relationships we proposed and found are consistent with previous research (e.g. Lee et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). With that being that, it is recommended that future studies adopt longitudinal and experimental designs in order to better capture the causal inferences between empowering leadership and paradoxical outcomes. This could be particularly helpful in developing a more thorough understanding of the relationship between empowering leadership and status; that is, does empowering leadership cause an increase in a follower's status, or do leaders (consciously or unconsciously) target low status followers for empowering behaviors? Further, although we know that individuals respond to empowering leadership in various ways, it is unclear what specific empowering behaviors elicit what specific responses. Therefore, a qualitative investigation may be particularly useful in providing a thick description (Tracy, 2019) of employee experiences of empowering leadership and the ways in which it impacts their work behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Empowering leadership has received increased attention from both academics and practitioners in recent years. Although the majority of the literature focuses on its positive effects on individual and organizational outcomes, researchers have begun to paint a more balanced picture of empowering leadership in the workplace. Our study found evidence that empowering leadership has both positive and negative effects through its bestowal of employee-perceived workplace status. Further, this study found evidence that felt obligation moderates the relationship between workplace status and discretionary behavioral outcomes (i.e. OCB and UPB). This helps to answer the question of when and how empowering leadership can lead to positive and negative outcomes for employees and organizations. We hope our work will encourage future scholars to consider both the bright and dark sides of empowering leadership more fully.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All data were collected following ethical principles for dealing with human subjects.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the first author.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The results without control variables are available upon request.

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