"Too much of a good thing?": exploring the dark side of empowering leadership by linking it with unethical pro-organizational behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – Grounded in social exchange theory (SET), the purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between empowering leadership and unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), as mediated by duty orientation (including duty to members, duty to mission and duty to codes). Further, this study proposes that perceived leader expediency moderates indirectly between empowering leadership and UPB.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper tests this social exchange model across a survey study using time-lagged data collections from 215 employees of a service company in China.

Findings – The results show that duty orientation mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and UPB. In addition, perceived leader expediency moderates the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and UPB through duty orientation (i.e. duty to members and duty to missions).

Originality/value – This research aids in understanding the impact of empowering leadership on follower outcomes by investigating the dark side of empowering leadership and examining the relationships between empowering leadership, duty orientation and UPB. The present study also challenges the notion that the phrase "the greater the empowerment, the better the outcomes" suggests that organizations should offer a conditional approach to the empowerment of followers by their leaders.

Keywords Unethical pro-organizational behavior, Empowering leadership, Perceived leader expediency, Duty orientation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Overwhelming evidence supports that many unethical activities—destroying incriminating documents to protect an organization's image or covering up false information to the public—are performed by employees to benefit their companies or members. For example, Nike was accused on social media in China of selling shoes that did not contain air cushions as advertised in 2017. Although the company claimed that the advertising agency had provided the wrong description, customers widely believed that this

was merely an excuse to maintain the company's image. Consequently, scholars have investigated the construct of unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), which has been defined as "unethical actions that seek to protect the interest of the organization or leaders" (Umphress *et al.*, 2010, p. 770). Given that UPB has been shown to affect the culture and performance of organizations substantially, there is growing interest in exploring the factors that generate it. Investigating the causes or antecedents of UPB can be especially meaningful and remains an important research topic.

Leadership can be an effective tool for handling followers' UPB, given that leadership has extraordinary influences on followers and, ultimately, on overall organizational systems (Fehr *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, previous research has consistently recognized the critical role played by leadership in influencing followers' UPB (Effelsberg *et al.*, 2014; Miao *et al.*, 2013). Notwithstanding the numerous studies on leadership–UPB relationships, the accumulated body of knowledge hints that leadership may not always be a positive force for reducing UPB. Recent empirical findings implicating empowering leadership suggest that unethical behavior may be invoked by administrations that create empowered and autonomous work environments (Lu *et al.*, 2017). Although empowering leadership benefits individual outcomes and entire organizations, potential adverse effects may arise from unregulated empowering behavior toward followers (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014; Cheong *et al.*, 2016). However, the empirical evidence as to how empowering leadership affects followers' unethical behavior is mixed, and very few studies have explored the possible downsides of empowering leadership (Kim *et al.*, 2018). Conceiving potential divergent aspects of empowering leadership and its effects would aid in explaining why empowering leadership is still considered a mystery by some people.

Therefore, drawing on social exchange theory (SET, Anderson and Williams, 1996), we strive to explore the role empowering leadership plays in providing followers with the decision-making authority and autonomy required to engage in unethical pro-organizational actions. In particular, empowerment from leaders motivates followers to experience increased duty orientation (i.e. an employee's voluntary orientation to loyally serve and faithfully support other members of the organization, to strive and sacrifice to achieve the tasks and missions of the team or organization and to honor its codes and principles; Hannah *et al.*, 2014, p. 220), which drives followers to serve the organization beyond the expectations initially imposed on them, for example, by engaging in UPB. In addition, we suggest that leader expediency—meaning how likely leaders are to engage in self-serving unethical practices (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2018)—as a boundary condition moderating the relationship between empowering leadership, duty orientation and UPB. The conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Our study makes several significant contributions. First, by incorporating the mediating mechanism of duty orientation drawn from SET, we present a more finely tuned investigation
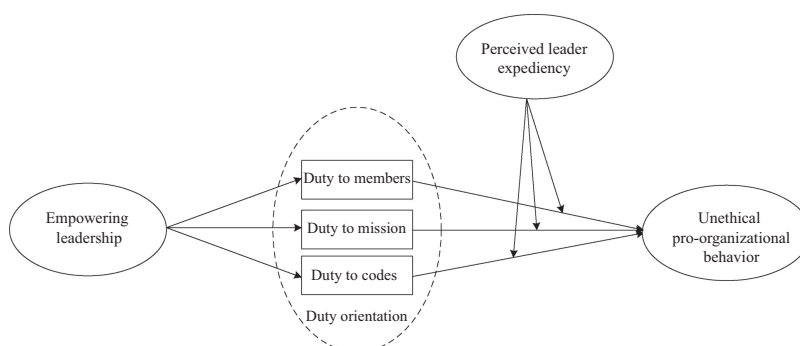

Figure 1.
Theoretical model

of empowering leadership as a potential trigger of followers' UPB. In this sense, our work is an essential complement to the existing research on the antecedents of UPB and explains the negative side of empowering leadership. Second, given that duty orientation is a necessary consequence of leader behavior (Moss *et al.*, 2019), by responding to Hannah *et al.*'s (2014) call to test the influence of leadership on (un)ethical behaviors through duty orientation, we build a deeper understanding of how duty orientation relates to leadership and ethics in the moral and organizational psychology literature. Finally, our study contributes to the limited research examining unethical behaviors because of social exchange. Studies of social exchange have dominantly focused on preferable exchanges at work (Vandermeer *et al.*, 2019; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017). Solely examining the positive reciprocity of social exchanges will only provide an incomplete picture of how and why followers respond to leader influences. Thus, we point out the essential direction of investigating the unwanted results of social exchange.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Empowering leadership and duty orientation

A central tenet of SET-related leadership is that leaders act as agents of their organizations to provide followers with benefits in exchange for followers' contributions to the organizations (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). Empowering leadership is leader behavior that is directed at employees or groups and involves delegating authority to followers, promoting autonomous decision-making, coaching and the sharing of information (Sharma and Kirkman, 2015). Following the logic of SET, empowering leadership is likely to be perceived by followers as positive and may lead them to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for task outcomes. In return, followers will feel obligated to reciprocate in kind by being dutiful toward the organization, which may heighten their prosocial behavior in several desirable or undesirable ways (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

We argue that duty orientation provides a sense of reciprocity and is framed as a mindset that desires to pursue a course of action that is of benefit to a target. Since recent research has revealed that empowering leadership can directly influence followers' work attitudes and behaviors, duty orientation may play a critical role in manifesting empowering effectiveness (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Duty orientation is reflected in three dimensions: duty to members, duty to mission and duty to codes. The three components of duty orientation comprise a normative orientation toward doing what is right for the organization. We expect that empowering leadership influences duty orientation for three reasons, outlined below.

First, empowering leadership predicts higher levels of duty to members in followers because followers' feelings of duty to members are primarily based on their leader's treatment of them. Empowering leaders inspire loyalty and service to the organization and its members and create strong social bonds connecting followers to the organization (i.e. duty to members). Followers will receive positive feedback, will internalize their leaders' values and will then behave consistently with those values. This enhances followers' self-worth and, subsequently, their duty orientation to reciprocate the positive behaviors of their leaders.

Second, empowering leaders will heighten followers' feelings of duty to achieve the missions of the organization (i.e. duty to mission). Duty to mission involves the extent to which a follower feels a moral obligation to support the mission of the organization. Empowering leadership creates favorable relationships marked by feelings of mutual obligation and reciprocity (Biemann *et al.*, 2015). The norm of reciprocity has been shown in organizations where followers are motivated to "give back" to their leaders in ways valued by the organization. Followers recognize their leaders' efforts to provide benefits to them, which may trigger positive attitude adjustments and engagement in work roles in efforts to repay those benefits.

Third, empowering leadership helps followers to clarify the codes to which their organization adheres (i.e. duty to codes). Duty to codes reflects that rules guide how one should or ought to behave. Empowering leadership may encourage followers' feelings of duty and obligation to their organization and to the codes to which that organization adheres by leading followers to make independent, reasoned and responsible choices (Buchholz, 1995). Followers who feel this sense of duty will manifest their beliefs by supporting their organization's members and obeying its codes and principles. Thus, we predict the following:

H1. Empowering leadership is positively related to followers' duty orientation (a. duty to members, b. duty to mission and c. duty to codes).

The moderating role of perceived leader expediency
Perceived leadership character is one of the most substantial contextual factors influencing followers' psychological states in the workplace (Bass and Bass, 2009). Perceived leader expediency provides employees with guidance on the behaviors they should display in response to the empowerment afforded them by their organizations. Therefore, we suggest that perceived leader expediency plays an essential role in influencing followers' attitudes and behaviors regarding the acceptability and practice of unethical conduct within organizations. Greenbaum *et al.* (2018) introduced the concept of leader expediency, which is defined as the use of unethical practices to expedite work for self-serving purposes. Expediency involves actions that are intended to fulfill organizationally approved objectives but may break, bend or stretch organizational rules and sanctioned norms (Parks *et al.*, 2010). For many members, leaders who engage in such behavior are instrumental in shaping their experiences, in guiding them in how to work and in showing discretion in decision-making. Leaders' actions may go against an organization's prescribed rules and violate the moral norms of behavior that are endorsed by individuals, causing harm to a third party. Such actions emphasize the results rather than the means and may knowingly breach organizational rules to attain organizational goals (Parks *et al.*, 2010).

Perceived high levels of leader expediency motivate employees to believe that organizational rules, norms and practices are manipulatable and that it is entirely suitable to improve performance by sacrificing ethical standards (Eissa, 2020). When employees experience duty orientation, they may face two choices: they may presume to facilitate task performance and organizational citizenship behavior; alternatively, they may choose to protect the interests of the organization by any means (e.g. UPB). Employees who perceive significant degrees of leader expediency are more likely than others to choose the latter approach because their underlying intent is to work efficiently and to expedite the completion of job-related assignments. These employees may behave out of a belief that their actions are necessary and required of them, which maximizes their willingness to engage in unethical behavior in the name of the company (i.e. UPB). UPB encompasses two dimensions: first, UPB is contrary to the accepted values, laws, or moral norms of society; second, it is conducted to benefit an organization, members of that organization, or their leaders (Effelsberg *et al.*, 2014). Although UPB may appear to be harmless at first, protecting the interests of an organization by lying to customers is likely to result in detrimental consequences for that organization.

We expect perceived leader expediency to moderate the relationship between duty orientation and UPB for three reasons. To begin with, we suggest that leader expediency interacts with duty to members to predict increased UPB. A leader with high levels of expediency tends to ignore the multivalent nature of the organizational systems and values and creates a climate that could pave the way for more severe infractions. Followers may use excuses to justify leader behavior— "I am just doing my job," or "The organization needs this"—rather than focusing on its morality (Umphress and Bingham, 2011). This view is

consistent with Kalshoven *et al.*'s (2016) idea that followers may focus on their duty to engage in an activity and on its possible beneficial consequences to their organization rather than on the moral aspects of the engagement. In other words, followers who perceive leaders with high levels of expediency have a greater tendency to embrace expediency as an appropriate way to behave. As a result of a strong duty to members, followers are driven to continuously help their coworkers and leaders in selfish or even unethical behavior, based on their desire to serve the best interests of other members and their feelings of obligation to loyally and faithfully support coworkers. Thus, we predict that:

H2a. Perceived leader expediency moderates the positive relationship between duty to members and UPB such that the relationship is stronger when the follower perceives leader expediency to be stronger (rather than weaker).

Moreover, leader expediency interacts with duty to mission to predict a higher level of UPB. By perceiving expediency as the efficient handling of business, followers with a strong duty to mission are more likely to view leader expediency as a credible example of appropriate conduct and to trust that expedient behaviors represent legitimate ways of completing tasks (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2018). Having a strong sense of duty promotes the acceptance of personal risk and the making of personal sacrifices to ensure the group does not fail (Hannah *et al.*, 2014). In other words, employees who engage in UPB may do so because they simply want to survive within the organization, not because they intentionally want to harm the organization or its members. Consistent with this perspective, research has shown that leader expediency could be a catalyst for more severe transgressions (Welsh *et al.*, 2015). Thus, we predict that:

H2b. Perceived leader expediency moderates the positive relationship between duty to mission and UPB such that the relationship is stronger when the follower perceives stronger (rather than weaker) leader expediency.

Last, perceived leader expediency should also moderate the link between duty to codes and UPB. Followers working under leaders with relatively high expediency levels face psychological challenges. First, maintaining a strong duty to codes under a leader of high expediency is far more stressful than doing so under a leader who is morally above selfishness. Followers with duty to codes greatly respect the organization by following its mores and norms. However, when followers perceive high levels of leadership expediency, they may believe that upholding social and moral norms is not essential for the benefit of the organization. Second, although leader expediency is unethical, it may not produce an identifiable victim. Leaders with high levels of expediency can be harmful to organizations in the long run; such potential consequences may not be immediately apparent. Followers with high levels of perceived leader expediency may work against an organization's prescribed rules and care more about how to complete their work assignments quickly and easily. Thus, we predict the following:

H2c. Perceived leader expediency moderates the negative relationship between duty to codes and UPB such that the relationship is weaker when the follower perceives stronger (rather than weaker) leader expediency.

A moderated mediation model
Integrating the arguments presented above, this study proposes that the promotion of duty orientation is a mechanism through which empowering leadership shapes the workplace. Indeed, our theorizing is in line with previous research showing that potential adverse effects may arise from unregulated empowering behavior toward followers (Amundsen and

Martinsen, 2014; Cheong *et al.*, 2016) and that high levels of duty orientation may lead to unethical behavior in support of organizations (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2018).

Unlike an employee who is asked to implement clear instructions, employees working with an empowering leader may have to generate solutions involving a wide variety of ways to resolve the task-related problems at hand. Empowering leadership creates an ambiguous situation wherein employees are unclear as to how they should approach the work or which decisions are appropriate (Schilpzand *et al.*, 2018). To solve this situational ambiguity, employees may attempt to gain understanding and control over their environment. SET assists in establishing the extent to which the sense of duty of followers to reciprocate treatment from their leaders with behaviors benefiting an organization may be a function of individual differences. Further, Eisenberger *et al.* (2004) proposed individual differences as a critical factor moderating the effects of empowering leadership on attitude and behavior. Indeed, research shows that perceived leader expediency facilitates attempts to cope with the work environment regarding the tasks expected of employees, producing the greater potential for empowerment (Eissa, 2020). In this way, empowering leaders signal to employees that it is safe to remove behavioral controls or bureaucratic constraints, and we contend that this effect may be strengthened or mitigated by the degree to which each employee perceives leader expediency.

First, when employees perceive leader expediency to a great extent, empowering leadership can influence UPB by enhancing followers' duty to members. Empowering leaders motivate individuals to transcend inactive mindsets, to take risks and to strengthen their self-responsibilities, leading them to be accountable for their outcomes. When high levels of leader expediency are perceived, followers feel their unethical behaviors are tolerated because they satisfy their obligations as an organizational member to act in the best interests of the organization (Tangirala *et al.*, 2013). Such workers might engage in organizationally beneficial behaviors, even when doing so is risky (McAllister and Ferris, 2016). Conger and Kanungo (1988) argued that unregulated empowerment practices exerted by a leader could result in follower overconfidence, causing followers to make tactical or strategic errors. To reciprocate an organization's empowerment, followers might engage more readily in pro-organizational behavior, even in unethical ways (i.e. UPB). Thus, we predict the following:

H3a. Perceived leader expediency will moderate the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and UPB through duty to members, such that the relationship will be stronger when perceived leader expediency is greater.

Second, when employees perceive a significant amount of leader expediency, empowering leadership can influence UPB through enhancing followers' duty to mission. Empowered followers will see themselves as autonomous performers and feel less constrained by rigid rules (Lee *et al.*, 2018). When employees perceive high levels of leader expediency, empowering leaders are likely to entice their employees to develop an attitude of unethical tolerance (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2018), which consequently promotes the proliferation of UPB (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2018). As duty to mission reflects the moral obligation of followers to support the mission of the organization, such followers are merely engaging in UPB out of an intrinsic belief that what they are doing is necessary. Thus, we predict the following:

H3b. Perceived leader expediency will moderate the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and UPB through duty to mission, such that the relationship will be stronger when perceived leader expediency is greater.

Finally, in instances where employees perceive significant leader expediency, leaders taking shortcuts or cutting corners could serve to mitigate the influence of empowering leadership on UPB by enhancing followers' duty to codes. Although empowering leadership can remove many organizational and job constraints and increase followers' decision-making authority,

followers with a strong duty-to-codes orientation adhere to their ethical principles and scrupulously fulfill their moral obligations (Spreitzer, 1995). Such obligations and responsibilities impel ethical behavior while deterring unethical actions that could dishonor the organization. Therefore, duty to codes can make duties to the group salient and allow followers to operate while fearing the negative consequences of straying from ethical behavior. Thus, we predict the following:

H3c. Perceived leader expediency will moderate the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and UPB through duty to codes, such that the relationship will be weaker when perceived leader expediency is greater.

Method
Participants and procedure
We recruited 300 participants who had full-time jobs in a large company in China. In the first survey, the followers were asked to complete a paper questionnaire about their demographics, moral identity and empowering leadership. Two weeks later, at Time 2, the participants rated duty orientation and perceived leader expediency. After another two-week interval, at Time 3, participants rated UPB. There were 265 participants in the Time 1 survey (an 88.33% response rate), 247 participants in the Time 2 survey (a 93.20% response rate) and 221 participants in the Time 3 survey (an 89.47% response rate). Participants who incorrectly responded to the response items and who completed the survey too quickly were removed from the analysis, leaving a final sample of 215 followers. On average, 72.09% of the participants were males, and 29.30% held bachelor's degrees. Their average age was 37.61. Their average work tenure was 9.89 years.

Measurements
Empowering leadership. Empowering leadership was measured using a 13-item scale developed by Ahearne (2005). The Cronbach alpha was 0.92.

Duty orientation. Duty orientation was measured using the 12-item scale developed by Hannah *et al.* (2014), with three subscales assessing duty to members, duty to mission and duty to codes, respectively. The Cronbach's α for the three dimensions in this study were as follows: duty to members ($\alpha = 0.80$), duty to mission ($\alpha = 0.86$) and duty to codes ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Unethical pro-organizational behavior. Participants were asked to recall a situation in which they had engaged in UPB over the past month and were required to report UPB using a six-item scale developed by Umphress *et al.* (2010). The response scale ranged from $1 =$ "rarely" to $5 =$ "very often." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

Perceived leader expediency. Perceived leader expediency was measured using a four-item scale developed by Greenbaum *et al.* (2018). The Cronbach's α was 0.89.

Control variables. Following the recommendation of previous studies (Dang *et al.*, 2017), we controlled for individual variables, including the followers' genders, ages, education and tenure, because these demographic characteristics were likely to influence participants' propensity to engage in UPB.

Results
Tests of measurement models. A series of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted using Mplus 7.4 (Muthén and Muthén, 2007) to examine the distinctiveness of the study's variables. The overall CFA results confirmed that the hypothesized six-factor model fitted the data appropriately ($\chi^2 = 145.72$, df $= 49$, χ^2/df $= 2.97$, CFI $= 0.93$, TLI $= 0.90$, RMSEA $= 0.09$). To examine whether common bias had affected our results, we conducted

Harman's one-factor model test, including the 35 items collected from the same source (i.e. the followers) in one model and comparing its model fit indices with the measurement model. The results showed the one-factor model with a combination of all items to be a poor fit for the data set. Hence, we believe that the common method variance did not have a significant effect on our data.

Hypothesis testing. Table 1 sets out the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among the study variables. The results showed that empowering leadership was positively associated with duty to members ($\gamma = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$), duty to mission ($\gamma = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$) and duty to codes ($\gamma = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, Hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c were supported. For Hypothesis 2, the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals were obtained for the hypothesized moderating effects from 5,000 bootstrap samples. The interaction between duty to members and perceived leader expediency was significantly related to UPB, as predicted ($\gamma = 0.36$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.58]). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was supported. In confirmation of Hypothesis 2b, perceived leader expediency significantly moderated the relationships between duty to mission and UPB ($\gamma = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.71]). However, perceived leader expediency did not moderate the relationship between duty to codes and UPB ($\gamma = -0.07$, 95% CI [−0.27, 0.12]), Hypothesis 2c is not supported.

To further analyze the nature of the interaction, we conducted a simple slopes analysis. As shown in Table 2, the results indicated that duty to members and duty to mission were significantly and positively related to UPB for employees' perceptions of significant leader expediency. However, these relationships were not significant for employees who perceived low levels of leader expediency. Thus, Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported, but not Hypothesis 2c.

We examined the conditional indirect effects following recommendations by Preacher *et al.* (2007). As shown in Table 3, for high levels of perceived leader expediency, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to members was significant (estimate = 0.17, CI [0.11, 0.22]). When perceived levels of leader expediency were low, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to members was not significant (estimate = 0.02, CI [−0.03, 0.07]). The total indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to members was also significant (estimate = 0.15, CI [0.09, 0.22]). Moreover, the indirect effect was stronger at higher levels of perceived leader expediency than at lower levels (differences = 0.15, CI [0.09, 0.22]). These effects are illustrated in Figure 2.

When perceived leader expediency levels were high, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to mission was significant (estimate = 0.18, CI [0.12, 0.26]). When perceived leader expediency levels were low, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to mission was not significant (estimate = 0.01, CI [−0.05, 0.06]). The total indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to mission was significant (estimate = 0.11, CI [0.06, 0.18]). Moreover, the indirect effect was stronger at higher levels of perceived leader expediency than at lower levels (differences = 0.18, CI [0.09, 0.28]). These effects are illustrated in Figure 3.

In addition, when perceived leader expediency levels were high, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to codes was significant (estimate = −0.09, CI [−0.19, −0.03]). When perceived leader expediency levels were low, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through duty to mission was also significant (estimate = −0.07, CI [−0.14, −0.02]). The total indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB via duty to codes was not significant (estimate = −0.01, CI [−0.07, 0.02]). Moreover, the indirect effect was not significantly stronger at higher levels of perceived leader expediency than at lower levels (differences = −0.02, CI [−0.11, 0.04]). Taken together, these results supported Hypotheses 3a and 3b, but not 3c.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
(1) Gender(T1)	1.28	0.45	–									
(2) Age(T1)	37.61	8.73	0.08	–								
(3) Education(T1)	1.99	0.84	0.20**	−0.40**	–							
(4) Work tenure(T1)	9.89	8.11	0.36**	0.45**	−0.43**	–						
(5) Moral identity(T1)	3.97	0.49	0.08	−0.28**	0.05	−0.23**	–					
(6) Empowering leadership(T1)	3.43	0.50	−0.04	0.22**	−0.33**	0.24**	−0.07	–				
(7) Duty to members(T2)	3.83	0.50	0.26**	0.04	−0.01	0.33**	−0.01	0.27**	–			
(8) Duty to mission(T2)	3.53	0.56	0.18**	0.08	0.24**	0.21**	−0.42**	0.31**	0.32**	–		
(9) Duty to code(T2)	3.56	0.54	0.15*	−0.14*	0.21**	−0.04	0.34**	0.26**	0.29**	0.31**	–	
(10) Perceived leader expediency(T2)	2.68	0.87	−0.29**	0.15*	0.03	0.23**	−0.54**	−0.06	0.11	0.12	−0.36**	–
(11) UPB(T3)	2.66	0.72	−0.15*	0.05	−0.21**	0.40**	−0.44**	0.34**	0.35**	0.36**	−0.15*	0.33**

Note(s): $N = 215$. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed), UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior

Table 1.
Means, standard
deviations and
correlations among
variables

Discussion

In the present study, we used SET to examine the impact of empowering leadership on follower UPB. Specifically, the results show that empowering leadership had a positive and indirect effect on followers' UPB via duty orientation. Slightly different from our expectations regarding the pattern of the moderation effect, we found that perceived leader expediency moderated the positive relationship between duty to mission, duty to members and UPB, such that this positive relationship was significant in the presence of high levels of leader expediency.

| Conditions	Duty to members→UPB		Duty to mission→UPB		Duty to codes→UPB	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
Low perceived leader expediency	−0.08	[−0.43, 0.16]	0.08	[−0.18, 0.32]	−0.18	[−0.44, 0.10]
High perceived leader expediency	0.24**	[0.35, 0.73]	0.84**	[0.52, 1.17]	−0.31**	[−0.52, −0.04]

Note(s): $N = 215$. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed), UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior

Table 2. Moderating effects of perceived leader expediency

Conditions	Empowering leadership→UPB					
	Duty to members		Duty to mission		Duty to codes	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
Low perceived leader expediency	0.02	[−0.03, 0.07]	0.01	[−0.05, 0.06]	−0.07**	[−0.14, −0.02]
High perceived leader expediency	0.17**	[0.11, 0.22]	0.18**	[0.12, 0.26]	−0.09**	[−0.19, −0.03]
Index of moderated mediation	0.09**	[0.06, 0.14]	0.11**	[0.06, 0.18]	−0.01	[−0.07, 0.02]
Indirect effect differences	0.15**	[0.09, 0.22]	0.18**	[0.09, 0.28]	−0.02	[−0.11, 0.04]

Note(s): $N = 215$. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed), UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior

Table 3. Conditional indirect effects
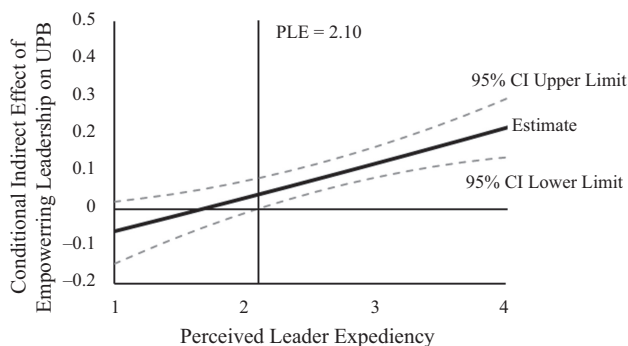
Note(s): PLE = Perceived leader expediency. The indirect effect is positive and significant when perceived leader expediency is equal to or greater than 2.10 (on a 5-point scale)

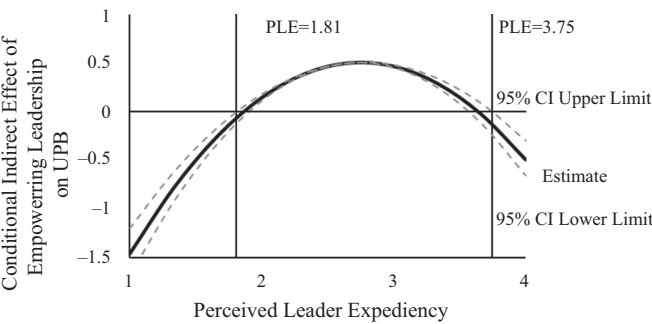**Figure 2.** Conditional indirect effect of empowering leadership and UPB via duty to members

Note(s): PLE = Perceived leader expediency. The indirect effect is
positive and significant when perceived leader expediency
is equal to or greater than 1.81, equal to or less than 3.75
(on a 5-point scale)

Theoretical implications
Our study has several important implications for the leadership and ethical literature. First,
our research aids in understanding the impact of empowering leadership on follower
outcomes by investigating the dark side of empowering leadership. Traditionally,
empowering leadership has been widely touted for its positive effects on followers' work
attitudes and behaviors. Overlooked in this approach is the possibility that empowering
leadership can induce duty orientation and thereby increase UPB. Our study serves the
theoretically and practically essential purposes of delineating why empowering leadership
has a positive effect on UPB and when this effect is more pronounced.

Second, following the notion of SET, the results of our research uncover the perpetual
mechanism of duty orientation, through which followers' UPB is promoted. Previous studies
examining how duty orientation affects followers' behaviors have exclusively focused on its
positive implications. Our study goes beyond this research by testing the conditional
influences of empowering leadership on UPB through the mediating effect of duty
orientation. As such, we answer Hannah *et al*.'s (2014) call and reveal the complexity
surrounding how duty orientation relates to other constructs studied in the broader
organizational and psychology literature, offering an insight into its new influences on UPB.
Moreover, this study extends previous work on duty orientation by encompassing the
multiple obligations followers feel (duty to members, mission and codes), rather than merely
focusing on their obligations to their organizations.

Third, the current research also contributes to the UPB literature by enhancing our
understanding of the precursors of UPB. Previous research on UPB has predominantly
emphasized antecedents, such as organizational identification. As such, scholars have
recently called for research that further extends our knowledge of alternative factors that
may predict UPB at work (Fehr *et al.*, 2019). The current study answers these calls by
examining the relationships between empowering leadership, duty orientation and UPB.

Practical implications
Our findings have several implications for practice. First, firms and scholars often boast
about the levels of autonomy their followers enjoy and how such empowerment has benefited
their organizations. Focusing on the positive consequences of empowering leadership, many
organizations are following suit, yet they may have overlooked the potential dark side of

empowering leadership. Our findings suggest that organizations must consider how to empower employees in a way that maximizes their benefits (e.g. job satisfaction and creativity) and minimizes the unintended costs of such empowerment (i.e. unethical behavior). This challenge to the notion that "the greater the empowerment, the better the outcomes" suggests that organizations should offer a conditional approach to the empowerment of followers by their leaders (Cheong *et al.*, 2016).

Second, although leader expediency has been seen to produce only small ethical infractions, these may alter followers' attitudes regarding the acceptability of unethical business practices and may ultimately lead to more frequent and severe infractions. Therefore, companies should be cautious about organizational policies that might promote expediency. More specifically, we recommend that organizations emphasize morality and ethics as much as they emphasize performance when selecting, promoting and training leaders. In addition, organizations should seek to reduce leader expediency by setting goals and performance evaluation criteria that emphasize ethics (Ordóñez *et al.*, 2009).

Third, our research confirms that duty to codes can reduce employees' UPB. Duty to codes will assist employees in identifying ethical issues and offering guidance on how to handle dilemmas in workplace operations. Empowering leadership undoubtedly plays a huge role in influencing an employee's duty to codes by its institution of policies and standards to address the ethical conduct of the organization. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that all employees have a clear understanding of business codes, which can offer guidance on how workers should act or react in various business situations.

Limitations and future directions
In calling attention to the limitations of this study, we simultaneously discuss avenues for further research. First, we have examined negative behaviors (i.e. UPB) as a response to empowering leadership, leaving open the question as to whether the relationship would continue if more proactive forms of ethical behavior were measured as the outcomes. Future research could not only explore factors that may help to minimize the negative consequences of empowering leadership but may also study those that could motivate followers to engage in other negative psychological reactions and behaviors, such as turnover intention, work overload, role conflict and role ambiguity (Cheong *et al.*, 2016).

Second, while the present research has shown that perceived leader expediency moderates the effect of empowering leadership on UPB, future research should explore other potential boundary conditions. For example, empirical work may examine whether the bottom-line mentality of leaders, competition or the personal moral values of followers may also strengthen the effects of empowering leadership on duty orientation and UPB. Future research should attempt to test additional leadership styles beyond empowering leadership to see how they may facilitate UPB and other unethical behaviors. Similarly, although the current study incorporates duty orientation as the focal mediator linking empowering leadership to UPB, alternative mediating mechanisms may explain these relationships.

Third, although the work undertaken here has attempted to provide a view of duty orientation from the perspective of empowering leadership, there is significant room for further research on how followers develop a sense of duty toward their companies and how duty development occurs on different organizational levels. Additionally, further research on other drawbacks of duty is necessary. For example, duty may lead to workaholism or a poor work-life balance, which could result in negative consequences for organizations, so it is essential to conduct further research into the possibility of the relationship between duty and work outcomes.

Finally, the data in the current study are self-reported. It is inevitable that internal phenomena consisting of self-concepts and intentions, phenomena that are not directly

accessible to external observers, will be measured by self-assessment (Spector, 2006). However, future research should test whether these results may be generalized using alternative methods, such as experiments, to gain a deeper understanding of why followers may be motivated to engage in UPB.

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