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The Hidden Dark Side of Empowering Leadership: The Moderating Role of Hindrance Stressors in Explaining When Empowering Employees Can Promote Moral Disengagement and Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

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The majority of theory and research on empowering leadership to date has focused on how empowering leader behaviors influence employees, portraying those behaviors as almost exclusively beneficial. We depart from this predominant consensus to focus on the potential detriments of empowering leadership for employees. Drawing from the social cognitive theory of morality, we propose that empowering leadership can unintentionally increase employees' unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), and that it does so by increasing their levels of moral disengagement. Specifically, we propose that hindrance stressors create a reversing effect, such that empowering leadership increases (vs. decreases) moral disengagement when hindrance stressors are higher (vs. lower). Ultimately, we argue for a positive or negative indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB through moral disengagement. We find support for our predictions in both a time-lagged field study (Study 1) and a scenario-based experiment using an anagram cheating task (Study 2). We thus highlight the impact that empowering leadership can have on unethical behavior, providing answers to both why and when the dark side of empowering leadership behavior occurs.

Keywords: empowering leadership, unethical pro-organizational behavior, moral disengagement, hindrance stressors

Empowering leadership, one of the most widely studied leadership styles, is defined as leader behavior intended to encourage greater employee self-direction (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). Scholars have treated it as a single, higher order construct with multiple dimensions, including promoting autonomy and participation; sharing power and control; and expressing confidence, high expectations, and trust (Ahearne et al., 2005; Kirkman & Rosen, 1997, 1999; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Contributing to its importance, research has shown its many benefits, such as increased employee job satisfaction, commitment, self-efficacy, creativity, and performance, and decreased deviance and turnover intentions (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2014; Kim & Beehr, 2017; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Srivastava et al., 2006; Zhang & Bartol, 2010; for meta-analytic evidence, see Kim et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018). Thus, the prevalent consensus is that empowering leadership is universally beneficial for organizations (i.e., it increases desirable, and decreases undesirable, employee outcomes).

However, this consensus may be premature because employees could view empowering leadership received as an opportunity to justify unethical means to achieve ends. To this point, empowering leadership has been linked to increased job-induced tension (Cheong et al., 2016) and when empowered, employees could alleviate pressure by resorting to unethical behavior because they have the autonomy and authority to do so. At least some tangential research on the effects of constructs similar to dimensions of empowering leadership on unethical behavior points to this possibility. For example, Lu et al. (2017) found that inducing feelings of job autonomy can trigger unethical behavior and argued that autonomy can make people "feel unconstrained by rules, which frees them up to behave unethically" (p. 223). Although research has supported the connection between such constructs and unethical behavior, scholars have yet to acknowledge the similarity between leader behaviors aligned with these constructs and dimensions of empowering leadership. Indeed, such findings suggest that

empowering leadership *as a gestalt* could likewise backfire by eliciting unethical conduct. To our knowledge, whether empowering leadership could result in unethical behavior has received no attention to date, so the assumption that empowering leadership is universally positive may be premature.

Not considering when and why empowering leadership could yield unethical behavior is problematic because it means that current theorizing is incomplete in terms of harmful outcomes of empowering leadership and boundary conditions, making undesirable outcomes more or less likely to occur. This limitation is also practically problematic because it could explain why some empowerment initiatives still do not achieve intended objectives (Argyris, 1998). In light of these opportunities, our purpose is to answer two questions to advance theory and research on empowering leadership including (a) can empowering leadership have unintended detriments in terms of unethical behavior and, if so, (b) when are these most likely to occur? We draw from Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of morality, which is highly relevant because it offers an overarching theoretical framework through which to explain why unethical behavior could be a potential outcome of empowering leadership and when such behavior is most likely to occur.

Bandura (1991) highlights that people's environment can affect whether they engage in unethical behavior because it could alter the extent to which they morally disengage from their behavior via its impeding moral self-regulation or providing exonerative circumstances. Thus, downstream effects of empowering leadership in terms of greater self-directed, and potentially unethical, behavior could be mediated by moral disengagement (i.e., cognitive mechanisms that mask the ethicality of a situation and allow unethical behavior without self-sanctioning; Bandura, 1991; see also Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012) and moderated by situational

factors. Based on Bandura (1991), we focus on hindrance stressors, or "work-related demands or circumstances that tend to constrain or interfere with an individual's work achievement" (Cavanaugh et al., 2000, p. 68), as a situational factor due to their potential to impede moral self-regulation as part of their taxing and outcome expectancy-suppressing effects and provide exonerative circumstances (LePine et al., 2005; Pearsall et al., 2009; Podsakoff et al., 2007). Bandura (1991) also stressed the role of self-evaluative and social effects of anticipated behavior in determining unethical conduct. As such, we focus on unethical pro-organizational behavior (i.e., UPB, or "actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization … and violate core societal values"; Umphress & Bingham, 2011, p. 622), as a distal outcome of empowering leadership because UPB's prosocial nature fits with findings that empowering leadership evokes a pro-organizational desire to help (Kim et al., 2018; Figure 1).

Our study makes three theoretical contributions. First, we shift the consensus that empowering leadership as a gestalt construct has effects that are universally beneficial to show that it can have harmful unintended consequences. We go beyond research on constructs similar to dimensions of empowering leadership, such as inducing job autonomy (Lu et al., 2017), and we extend theory by arguing that empowering leadership, which is almost exclusively viewed through a positive motivational lens, can backfire, resulting in moral disengagement and, ultimately, UPB. This implies that theorizing on empowering leadership should consider new layers of conceptually relevant mechanisms and outcomes, improving our understanding of the unintended, or hidden, dark side effects of this widely studied leadership construct. Second, we identify hindrance stressors as a moderator that can reverse empowering leadership's effects on undesirable outcomes and thus imply a fuller integration

Figure 1
Theoretical Model
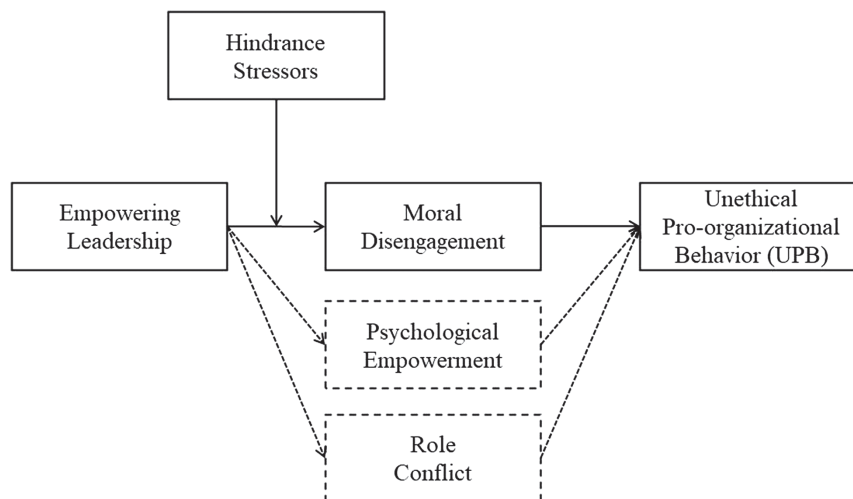
Note. Dashed boxes/arrows reflect constructs measured to test for two alternative mechanisms as per our Study 1, Supplementary Analyses. On the basis of prior research and inspired by comments from the anonymous reviewers, we tested an alternative positive (i.e., psychological empowerment) and negative (i.e., role conflict) underlying mechanism. Though not depicted here (for clarity), we also modeled hindrance stressors as moderating each of the paths from empowering leadership to the variables representing our alternative mechanisms.

of positive motivational constructs (i.e., empowering leadership) with more negative ones (i.e., hindrance stressors) to advance empowering leadership research (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This also has implications for Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of morality, as it argues that people are more likely to resist behaving unethically when their moral self-regulation is boosted, as should be the case through empowering leadership. Finally, we extend research on UPB antecedents by proposing that even leaders and workplace characteristics unrelated to morality can trigger UPB. We thus move beyond research examining leadership related only to ethics (e.g., ethical leadership; Miao et al., 2013) by arguing that presumably positive leader actions can inadvertently increase UPB.

Theoretical Development and Hypotheses

Scholars treat empowering leadership as a unitary construct manifesting in distinct behavioral dimensions (i.e., promoting autonomy and participation; sharing power and control; and expressing confidence, high expectations, and trust; Kirkman & Rosen, 1997; see also Ahearne et al., 2005; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Zhang & Bartol, 2010).[1] In line with prior research, we focus on empowering leadership as a gestalt to match the bandwidth between our predictor and criteria and better compare our findings with extant research, which almost always focuses on the construct as a whole. To explain its benefits, researchers rely on motivational theories, such as self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagné & Deci, 2005) or psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), focusing on how promoting and enabling human agency can be motivating. They argue that empowering leadership boosts motivation and desirable outcomes because it allows employees to satisfy autonomy (e.g., by providing more decision-making latitude) and competence (e.g., by enriching jobs) needs. For example, Ahearne et al. (2005, p. 946) argue, "leadership is an important driver of the success of empowered organizations," and empowering leadership should boost efficacy and adaptability, ultimately, enhancing performance. Harris et al. (2014) posit that empowering leadership promotes performance by increasing motivation and encourages employees to act autonomously in their roles. Vecchio et al. (2010) argue that empowering leadership shares power to encourage self-direction, thus increasing performance and satisfaction. In sum, research has painted a rosy picture of empowering leadership's effects on employees' autonomous self-direction. However, past work has not considered that constructs similar to dimensions of empowering leadership can yield unethical behavior more broadly, nor how conditions hindering goal achievement can counteract its intended effects, potentially causing the agency it ignites to backfire.

For example, as noted, inducing people to feel more job autonomy can increase unethical behavior because it makes them feel less bound by organizational rules (Lu et al., 2017; see also research on monitoring, finding that people cheated more when they were unmonitored and had more autonomy; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). Moreover, inducing feelings of authority or power can: increase unethical behavior, in particular, when people are accountable for decisions (like with empowering leadership); decrease susceptibility to ethical norms or climates; and increase abusive behavior and incivility (Foulk et al., 2018; Pitesa & Thau, 2013a, 2013b). Leaders' high expectations and trust could also boost employees' unethicality by increasing agency or self-efficacy (i.e., an outcome

of empowering leadership) because self-efficacious people disengage more from their values or believe their behavior will go undetected (Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2021; Shepherd et al., 2013). Lastly, goal setting can promote unethical behavior when people have unmet goals and are told to do their best, or when they have high performance goals (Schweitzer et al., 2004; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). This evidence suggests that it could be more accurate to consider whether empowering leadership as a gestalt has the potential to increase unethical behavior. Thus, we depart from the consensus on positive effects and draw from Bandura (1991) social cognitive theory of morality to argue that empowering leadership could yield UPB.

Specifically, Bandura (1991) argues that people assess two sets of consequences of anticipated unethical behavior before engaging in it: self-evaluative reactions (e.g., self-satisfaction) and social effects (e.g., reactions of others, such as praise, or benefits generated for the larger social good). Empowering leadership evokes a desire to help an organization because leaders act as its representatives, and research shows that it positively relates to perceived organizational support (Harris et al., 2014) and trust in supervisors (Hassan et al., 2019; Zhang & Zhou, 2014), and it makes employees more leader-like and concerned with their organization's success by increasing commitment, identification, organization-based self-esteem, ownership, job crafting, and career commitment (Hassan et al., 2013, 2019; Kim & Beehr, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). As such, UPB is a likely outcome of empowering leadership because, in some situations, employees could view UPB as a way to reciprocate for empowering leadership (Wang et al., 2019), and its prosocial nature (i.e., it benefits an organization) can make employees favorably evaluate it in terms of anticipated self-evaluative (i.e., they could feel satisfied with themselves) and social (i.e., they might expect praise because they boost their organization's welfare or believe their deeds will benefit their organization) effects (Bandura, 1991). Empowering leadership ignites self-direction but has no moral implications, thus leaving it up to employees to decide whether to use unethical means to help their organization.

Regarding when this likely occurs, Bandura (1991) argues that moral behavior is determined "in concert with situational factors" (Bandura, 1991, p. 68), which provide cues for judging appropriateness of behavior and can adversely affect moral self-regulation. Situational factors, which are contextual features outside an individual (i.e., he also uses the terms social context or environmental influences), can provide exonerative circumstances. People will also struggle to exercise moral self-regulation "effectively and consistently under the pressure of contravening influences" (Bandura, 1991, p. 69), or when situational factors suppress beliefs in their self-regulatory efficacy. Lastly, situational factors can adversely affect moral self-regulation by impeding the development of

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[1] It is important to note that empowering leadership refers to leader behaviors and thus should not be confused with psychological empowerment, as Spreitzer (1995) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) discuss, which describes employees' cognitions about feeling empowered. Moreover, it differs from other leadership styles (e.g., participation, delegation, transformational leadership) and leader–follower relationship quality. For more complete discussions, see Cheong et al. (2019), Pearce et al. (2003), and Sharma and Kirkman (2015). Lastly, in support of its incremental predictive validity, empowering leadership explains additional variance (e.g., in employee creativity and OCB) even after controlling for both transformational leadership and leader–member exchange (Lee et al., 2018).

self-regulatory competence, failing to support compliance with moral norms, or triggering disengagement of moral self-regulation (Bandura, 1991). Thus, "people often experience conflicts in which behavior they themselves devalue can serve as the means for attaining valued benefits" (Bandura, 1991, p. 72). Depending on situational factors, people can adopt a pragmatic orientation and make expediency the driving force behind their actions, allowing them to do whatever is needed to get things done (Bandura, 1991). In sum, both empowering leadership and hindrance stressors are relevant situational factors as justified by Bandura's theory because of their established effects on self-regulation. As such, we argue that empowering leadership should positively affect UPB via its effect on moral disengagement, and it should do so only when situational factors that adversely affect moral self-regulation are higher.

The Moderating Role of Hindrance Stressors on the Empowering Leadership–Moral Disengagement Relationship

Hindrance stressors, which can include red tape, office politics, bureaucracy, role ambiguity, and job insecurity or conflict (LePine et al., 2016), stand out as a situational moderator for two reasons. First, based on Bandura (1991), an environment with contravening influences, such as hindrance stressors, could adversely affect moral self-regulation in response to other stimuli, such as leader behavior, because they cause strains (LePine et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2007; Rodell & Judge, 2009), psychological withdrawal (Pearsall et al., 2009), and cognitive reappraisals (LePine et al., 2016), thwarting moral self-regulation. Such an environment is also more likely to offer exonerative circumstances and less likely to support employees' development of moral self-regulatory competence or compliance with moral standards when leaders attempt to empower them. Second, hindrance stressors are also directly implicated by empowerment theory (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), which highlights them as roadblocks to goals that employees cannot circumvent and work at cross-purposes to empowering leadership. The theory recognizes conditions leading to feelings of powerlessness (e.g., bureaucracy, role ambiguity), which can be classified as hindrance stressors, as workplace factors distinct from empowering leadership, and removing such factors is necessary for empowering employees because they can suppress outcome expectancies. As such, employees could cut corners via unethical means as a fallback to restore such expectancies because playing by the rules, requiring succumbing to an organizational context characterized by hindrance stressors, is likely perceived as constraining or futile in achieving desired outcomes.

We propose that hindrance stressors reverse empowering leadership's effects on moral disengagement (i.e., eight interrelated mechanisms allowing people to behave unethically by lowering moral self-sanctions anticipatorily, including moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame) and, ultimately, UPB, and thus we do not propose main effects because a reversing pattern typically implies that such effects get canceled out (Gardner et al., 2017).[2] These mechanisms can cause employees to disengage from unethical behavior at four points in the regulatory process including by: reconstruing their conduct, obscuring causal agency,

misrepresenting or disregarding harmful consequences, or devaluating and blaming victims (Bandura, 1991).

There are at least three reasons why hindrance stressors could cause empowering leadership to have a positive effect on moral disengagement. First, hindrance stressors can cause employees to be depleted because they increase strains, such as anxiety, exhaustion, and frustration (LePine et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2007), which are cognitively taxing and can adversely affect self-regulatory capability. Thus, as employees deal with hindrance stressors, they become depleted. In turn, when leaders empower depleted employees to assume more self-direction (i.e., increasing demands on self-regulatory capacity), they likely morally disengage to conserve resources because a combination of empowering leadership and hindrance stressors is demanding. For example, disregarding potential consequences of unethical behavior could help employees to conserve resources by applying less scrutiny to their work when navigating empowered roles. Second, because hindrance stressors are related to psychological withdrawal and intentions to leave an organization (Boswell et al., 2004; Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Pearsall et al., 2009), implying that employees care less about others (e.g., colleagues, customers), they could lead employees to view others less empathetically. In turn, when withdrawn employees are empowered by leaders to assume greater self-direction, they likely morally disengage as part of their withdrawal. For example, by dehumanizing or blaming victims of their unethical behavior, employees could ensure that they would not be psychologically involved in the consequences of their self-direction. Third, hindrance stressors can cause employees to cognitively reappraise their jobs as having unfavorable personal cost–benefit ratios. To this point, hindrance stressors increase perceptions that demands have a "potential to result in personal loss, constraints, or harm" (LePine et al., 2016, p. 1039), and they make employees believe they suffer personal detriments dealing with job demands (LePine et al., 2016), which makes them try and restore control over personal benefits when empowered. By misrepresenting harmful consequences, reconstruing their conduct, or obscuring causal agency, empowered employees could thus ensure they can use their greater self-direction more for their personal benefit.

Conversely, when hindrance stressors are lower, employees will be less likely to feel depleted, withdrawn, or appraise demands as personal detriments when their leaders empower them. Instead, greater self-direction stimulated by empowering leadership should decrease moral disengagement because situational factors neither adversely affect moral self-regulation nor provide exonerative circumstances for why unethical conduct is adequate in response to empowering leadership. In sum, hindrance stressors will qualify the relationship between empowering leadership and moral disengagement, such that it is positive when hindrance stressors are higher, and negative when they are lower.

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[2] We do not consider challenge stressors, or "work-related demands or circumstances that, although potentially stressful, have associated potential gains for individuals" (Cavanaugh et al., 2000, p. 68; see also LePine et al., 2005), as a potential moderator because our theorizing centers on contravening forces that run counter to empowering leadership effects (see also our Supplementary Analyses section). Given that challenge stressors can usually be coped with and offer potential gains, they fall outside the scope of our discussion.

Hypothesis 1: Hindrance stressors moderate the relationship between empowering leadership and moral disengagement, such that the relationship is positive when hindrance stressors are higher, and negative when hindrance stressors are lower.

The Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement

UPB describes unethical acts that benefit organizations, including acts of commission and omission, such as misrepresenting, exaggerating, or concealing the truth; or withholding negative information about one's organization, products, or employees (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Moral disengagement allows people to disengage from unethical behavior by reconstruing conduct, obscuring causal agency, misrepresenting or disregarding harmful consequences, or devaluating and blaming victims (Bandura, 1991). The more employees engage in these tactics to distance themselves from the immorality of their actions, the more likely they are to exhibit UPB. For example, employees could reconstrue the unethicality of UPB because the intention of their acts is to benefit the organization and, thus, their acts could be viewed as being in the service of the larger good (Chen et al., 2016). In support of our theoretical contention, research shows that moral disengagement is an antecedent of unethical behavior (e.g., Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012) and, specifically, UPB (Chen et al., 2016).

For an indirect effect, we follow process models of ethical decision making, according to which situational factors (e.g., empowering leadership, hindrance stressors) influence moral self-regulation (e.g., moral disengagement), which in turn affects unethical behavior (e.g., UPB). For example, Detert et al.'s (2008) model suggests that an internal (vs. external) locus of control is negatively (vs. positively) related to moral disengagement, which in turn is positively related to unethical decision making. By extension, empowering leadership increases employees' internal locus of control, but with higher hindrance stressors, such feelings could be nullified because higher hindrance stressors likely foster perceptions of being externally controlled. In sum, we argue that the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB varies as a function of hindrance stressors.

Hypothesis 2: Empowering leadership indirectly affects UPB through moral disengagement, such that this indirect effect is positive when hindrance stressors are higher, and negative when hindrance stressors are lower.

Overview of Studies

We conducted two studies to test our model. In Study 1, we used a time-lagged, self-report field study to maximize external validity. In Study 2, we used a scenario-based experiment to manipulate our independent variables to establish causality and obtain high internal validity.

Transparency and Openness

We describe our sampling plan, and all data exclusions, manipulations, and measures in the study, and we adhered to the *Journal of Applied Psychology*'s methodological checklist. All data and code are available from the first author, and we report materials in the Appendix A. We used STATA 15.1 for all analyses. This study's design and its analysis were not preregistered. We obtained IRB approvals from the ERIM Internal Review Board at Erasmus University Rotterdam (Study name "How empowering leadership leads to unethical pro-organizational behavior," IRB Nos. NE2018-018 and 2018/11/06-56101tde). Lastly, we note that we conducted two independent studies (i.e., a cross-sectional survey and a scenario-based experiment study) as part of this research that fully supported our predictions but are no longer reported in this article. The method and results of these studies are available from the first author upon request.

Study 1: Method

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 543 working adults from various industries and jobs whose first language was English and who had a direct supervisor via Prolific (Peer et al., 2017; see also Chen et al., 2019) for a multiwave study with 2 weeks between waves to minimize attrition (see Kluemper et al., 2019; Mawritz et al., 2017). Data collected via Prolific and MTurk are as reliable as traditional methods (Behrend et al., 2011; Buhrmester et al., 2011). Payment was an hourly rate of 5.50 British Pounds (GBP). Average attrition between waves was 14% for an overall retention rate of 63% (i.e., 344 out of 543 participants), comparable to other research (e.g., Lam et al., 2018). Using extant practices (e.g., Chen et al., 2019), we screened for careless responses using IP addresses and two attention check items (Meade & Craig, 2012), leading to 14 deletions and a sample of 330 employees (57% female). Participants' average age was 37.5 years ($SD = 9.6$), with an average of 5.2 years of posthigh school education ($SD = 3.6$). They worked, on average, 5.4 years in current jobs ($SD = 5.0$), and 3.2 years with current supervisors ($SD = 2.7$). Participants resided in the U.K. (69%), the U.S. (27%), and Canada (4%). To reduce method bias, we used a time-lagged design, guaranteed anonymity, and controlled for socially desirable responding (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We assessed empowering leadership at Time 1, hindrance stressors and moral disengagement at Time 2, and UPB at Time 3 (Lian et al., 2014).

Measures

Unless otherwise noted, the response scales for all items ranged from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree* (see Appendix A for a full list of instructions and items used).

Empowering Leadership

We assessed empowering leadership using Kirkman and Rosen's (1999) 14-item measure adapted to refer to the individual level (e.g., "Gives me many responsibilities"; α = .90).

Hindrance Stressors

We measured how often participants dealt with hindrance stressors in their daily work using LePine et al.'s (2016) 10-item scale, e.g., "Bureaucratic constraints to completing work [red tape]"; α = .88; 1 = *Never* to 7 = *Always*.

Moral Disengagement

We measured moral disengagement in the workplace using Moore et al.'s (2012) 8-item scale (e.g., "It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about"; α = .83).

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

We assessed UPB using Umphress et al.'s (2010) 6-item scale (e.g., "If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good"; α = .91).

Control Variables

Because our interest is in the effect of empowering leadership behavior on moral disengagement and UPB, we controlled for amoral supervisor behavior because social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) suggests that employees could adopt supervisors' unethical behavior when they experience it or if they view supervisors as role models (Treviño, 1986), adapting a 5-item amorality scale (Dahling et al., 2009; α = .95). We controlled for moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; α = .84) and people's tendency to be sincere and avoid fraud (using 6 items from the HEXACO Inventory; Ashton & Lee, 2009; α = .77) to rule out these morality predispositions as alternative explanations (Castille et al., 2018; Detert et al., 2008). We controlled for psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995; α = .90) because empowerment is often positioned as a mediator of empowering leadership effects (Chen et al., 2011; Zhang & Bartol, 2010), and it was important to demonstrate that our predictions hold beyond this alternative mediator. We controlled for social desirability because people could answer in socially desirable ways when a study involves unethical behavior (e.g., Umphress et al., 2010) using the 10-item version of Strahan and Gerbasi's (1972; α = .74) scale. Lastly, following recommendations, we controlled for challenge stressors because the two types of stressors are nonindependent (Cavanaugh et al., 2000) using LePine et al.'s (2016; α = .94) 10-item scale.

Study 1: Results

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics and correlations. To test conditional indirect effects, we used path analyses (Edwards &

Lambert, 2007) and calculated bias-corrected, bootstrapped confidence intervals around the indirect effect estimates based on 5,000 replications (MacKinnon et al., 2004), which is recommended to avoid problems related to statistical power for the causal steps or Sobel test (MacKinnon et al., 2002; see also Zhang & Peterson, 2011). We mean-centered all predictor variables prior to analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) and variance inflation factors (all VIFs ≤ 1.90) did not raise any concerns.

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) on our substantive multi-item variables (i.e., empowering leadership, hindrance stressors, moral disengagement, and UPB) to establish whether the hypothesized four-factor structure was tenable. Following past research (Sherf et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018), we used item parcels for empowering leadership and hindrance stressors to maintain a favorable indicator-to-sample-size ratio and because parceling offers important advantages (Little et al., 2002, 2013). We created four parcels for empowering leadership and three for hindrance stressors by randomly assigning items to parcels (Landis et al., 2000; see also Sherf et al., 2019). Results showed that the hypothesized four-factor model fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 358.11$; d$f = 183$; RMSEA = .05; CFI = .95; SRMR = .05) and better than alternative nested models with fewer factors (e.g., constraining moral disengagement and UPB parcels to load onto one factor; all ps for chi-squared difference tests < .001; chi-squared differences ranged from 582.44 to 2681.14 with degrees of freedom ranging from 3 to 6).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted that empowering leadership and hindrance stressors interact to affect moral disengagement, such that empowering leadership increases (vs. decreases) moral disengagement when hindrance stressors are higher (vs. lower). Supporting Hypothesis 1, the Empowering leadership × Hindrance stressors interaction term was significant ($b = .15$, $p < .001$), accounting for an additional 2.9% of variance, $F (1, 320) = 13.54$, $p < .001$; Table 2, Model 2. The simple slope of empowering leadership on moral disengagement was positive at higher ($b = .15$, $p < .05$), and negative at lower ($b = -.16$, $p < .05$), levels of hindrance stressors (Figure 2).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (Study 1)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Amoral supervision	2.44	1.57										
2. Moral identity	4.93	0.81	−.01									
3. Sincerity	4.84	1.28	−.12*	.11								
4. Psychological empowerment	4.90	1.10	−.25***	.26***	.10							
5. Social desirability	4.45	0.88	−.14*	.18**	.44***	.17**						
6. Challenge stressors	4.87	1.18	.09	.20***	.17**	.26***	.14*					
7. Empowering leadership	5.13	0.96	−.46***	.18***	.05	.54***	.06	.25***				
8. Hindrance stressors	3.14	1.03	.41***	.02	−.06	−.18***	−.15**	.45***	−.13*			
9. Moral disengagement	2.27	0.87	.32***	−.15**	−.43***	−.18***	−.26***	−.14*	−.17**	.18**		
10. UPB	2.72	1.33	.15**	.01	−.30***	.01	−.08	−.02	.03	.12*	.38***	
11. EL × HIN interaction	−0.13	1.05	−.23***	.01	.09	.08	−.00	.03	.29***	.03	.08	.23***

Note. $N = 330$. Variables 1–10 were rated on 7-point scales. UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior; EL = empowering leadership; HIN = hindrance stressors. Predictors were mean-centered in creating the interaction term.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Regression Results (Study 1)

Variable	Moral disengagement			Unethical pro-organizational behavior			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Intercept	2.27*** (0.04)	2.29*** (0.04)	2.29*** (0.05)	2.72*** (0.07)	2.77*** (0.07)	2.76*** (0.07)	1.90*** (0.22)
Controls							
Amoral supervision	0.14*** (0.03)	0.16*** (0.03)		0.13* (0.05)	0.17** (0.05)		0.11* (0.05)
Moral identity	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)		0.01 (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)		0.05 (0.08)
Sincerity	-0.24*** (0.04)	-0.25*** (0.04)		-0.33*** (0.06)	-0.36*** (0.06)		-0.26*** (0.06)
Psychological empowerment	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)		0.04 (0.08)	0.07 (0.08)		0.07 (0.07)
Social desirability	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)		0.13 (0.09)	0.15 (0.09)		0.15 (0.08)
Challenge stressors	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.09* (0.04)		-0.08 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.07)		-0.02 (0.07)
Predictors							
EL	0.04 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.17*** (0.05)	0.17 (0.10)	0.05 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.08)	0.05 (0.09)
HIN	0.09 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.12** (0.05)	0.13 (0.09)	0.07 (0.08)	0.14 (0.07)	0.04 (0.08)
Interaction							
EL × HIN		0.15*** (0.04)	0.11* (0.05)		0.37*** (0.07)	0.30*** (0.07)	0.32*** (0.07)
Mediator							
Moral disengagement							0.38*** (0.09)
R^2	0.284	0.313	0.068	0.129	0.206	0.068	0.248

Note. $N = 330$. Models 3 and 6 are reported as robustness checks without controls. Unstandardized estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. EL = empowering leadership; HIN = hindrance stressors.

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

Hypothesis 2 predicted that empowering leadership indirectly affects UPB through moral disengagement, such that the effect is positive (vs. negative) when hindrance stressors are higher (vs. lower). Prior to testing this hypothesis, we examined whether empowering leadership and hindrance stressors interact to *directly* affect UPB, such that empowering leadership increases (vs. decreases) UPB when hindrance stressors are higher (vs. lower). The interaction term was significant ($b = .37$, $p < .001$), accounting for an additional 7.7% of variance, $F(1, 320) = 30.93$, $p < .001$; Table 2, Model 5; and the simple slope of empowering leadership on UPB was positive at higher (i.e., $M + 1SD$; $b = .43$, $p < .001$), and negative at lower (i.e., $M–1SD$; $b = -.34$, $p = .01$), levels of hindrance stressors (Figure 3).[3]

For Hypothesis 2, moral disengagement positively predicted UPB ($b = .38$, $p < .001$; Table 2, Model 7). Next, we calculated the indirect effects via moral disengagement at higher and lower levels of the moderator (see also Zhang & Peterson, 2011). On the basis of the overall two-way interaction model (Table 2, Model 2), we calculated the simple slopes (and standard errors) for empowering leadership in predicting moral disengagement (path *a*, MacKinnon et al., 2004) for the two conditions. We multiplied the coefficients for the simple slopes of path *a* with the coefficient for path *b* (i.e., moral disengagement predicting UPB; Table 2, Model 7) for the conditional indirect effects estimates (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). The index of moderated mediation was significant, $b = .06$, 95% CI [.02, .12], and the indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB via moral disengagement was positive, $b = .06$, 95% CI [.0002, .14], at higher, and negative, $b = -.06$, 95% CI [-.16, -.002], at lower, levels of hindrance stressors, supporting Hypothesis 2. The difference was significant, $b = -.12$, 95% CI [-.25, -.04].

Supplementary Analyses

We ran a series of supplementary analyses.[4] First, we substituted challenge stressors as a moderator in place of hindrance stressors in our Models 2 and 5 (Table 2), respectively. Consistent with our expectations above, the analysis revealed that the Empowering leadership × Challenge stressors interaction was not a significant predictor of either moral disengagement ($b = -.05$, $SE = .03$, $p > .05$)

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[3] Following Bernerth and Aguinis (2016), we ran several robustness checks for both moral disengagement and UPB as dependent variables. First, whether we used ordinary least squares regressions or path analysis did not alter the nature of the reported results. Second, results remained unchanged when we additionally controlled for age, gender, job tenure, supervisor tenure, positive reciprocity beliefs toward the supervisor [using Eisenberger et al.'s (2004) scale; e.g., "I always repay my boss when he/she has done me a favor"; α = .89], and job satisfaction [using 3 items by Hackman & Oldham (1975); e.g., "Generally speaking, I am satisfied with my job"; α = .94]. Third, controlling for the Empowering leadership × Challenge stressors interaction term did not affect our results. Fourth, without controls, results remained largely unaffected (Table 2, Models 6 and 3). Lastly, for UPB specifically, results did not change when we additionally controlled for unethical "pro-self" behavior (to disentangle whether employees' motivation to engage in unethical behavior is to benefit their organization or, ultimately, themselves; for a discussion, see Umphress & Bingham, 2011) using an adapted version of Umphress et al.'s (2010) full scale (e.g., "If it would *help me personally* [emphasis added], I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good"; α = .93) and organizational identification [Mael and Ashforth's (1992) scale; α = .93].

[4] We thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions regarding Supplementary Analyses.

Figure 2

Moderating Effect of Hindrance Stressors on the Relationship Between Empowering Leadership and Moral Disengagement (Study 1)
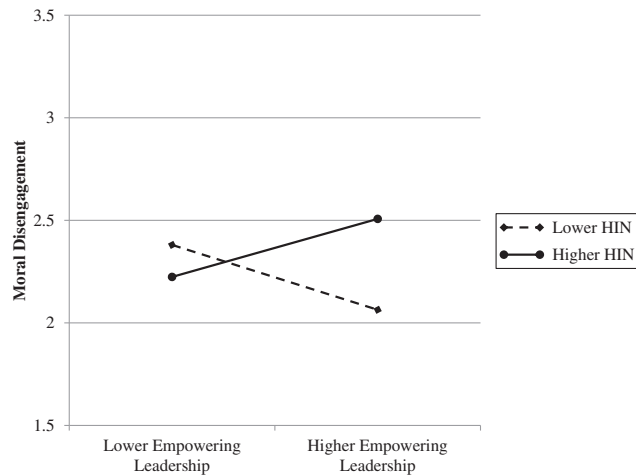
Note. HIN = hindrance stressors. Lower/Higher = $M \pm 1SD$.

or UPB ($b = .00$, $SE = .05$, $p > .05$). Second, replacing UPB with unethical pro-self behavior (see Footnote 3), we reran our analyses with unethical pro-self behavior as a dependent variable. As it is important to tease out people's intentions for why they engage in unethical behavior (i.e., to help themselves vs. to help their organization; see Umphress & Bingham, 2011), we controlled for UPB in this analysis in addition to our other controls. The Empowering leadership × Hindrance stressors interaction was not a significant predictor of unethical pro-self behavior ($b = -.02$, $SE = .06$, $p > .05$). Third, to test the robustness of the moderated mediating effect of moral disengagement in the presence of other theoretically plausible mediators, we tested

Figure 3

Moderating Effect of Hindrance Stressors on the Relationship Between Empowering Leadership and UPB (Study 1)
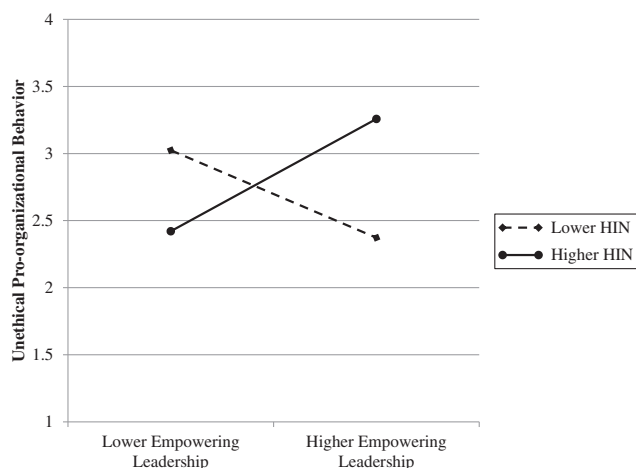
Note. UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior; HIN = hindrance stressors. Lower/Higher = $M \pm 1SD$.

psychological empowerment (removed as a control variable first) and role conflict (assessed using the 8-item scale by Rizzo et al., 1970; e.g., "I have to do things that should be done differently"; α = .88) as alternative mediating mechanisms. Psychological empowerment is a widely established mediating mechanism of empowering leadership effects (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015; Chen et al., 2011, 2019; Fong & Snape, 2015; Raub & Robert, 2010; Zhang & Bartol, 2010), and so its inclusion seemed important and theoretically meaningful. Regarding role conflict, as noted, Cheong et al. (2016) examined job-induced tension as a mechanism through which empowering leadership could affect performance and measured it with "a six-item job induced tension scale [Rizzo et al., 1970]" (Cheong et al., 2016, p. 607). Given that Rizzo et al. (1970) do not explicitly refer to a job-induced tension scale, we used their 8-item role conflict scale instead to capture tensions, as we believed it was theoretically important to account for this potential alternative mechanism of empowering leadership. We followed Koopman et al. (2020) and kept the independent variables (IVs) and their interaction constant while substituting different mediators into our model. We believed that this was the most robust approach methodologically and also represented plausible scenarios conceptually for which to account. The Empowering leadership × Hindrance stressors interaction was not significant for either psychological empowerment ($b = -.05$, $SE = .05$, $p > .1$) or role conflict ($b = .06$, $SE = .05$, $p > .1$). Moreover, psychological empowerment was not significantly related to UPB ($b = .10$, $SE = .07$, $p > .1$), whereas role conflict was ($b = .23$, $SE = .07$, $p = .001$). Importantly, moral disengagement was a significant predictor of UPB ($b = .36$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$) even in the presence of the two alternative mechanisms. Lastly, we explored a potential moderated curvilinear relationship of empowering leadership with moral disengagement and UPB. Specifically, we adapted Models 2 and 5 (Table 2) to include a moderated curvilinear term (i.e., Empowering leadership × Empowering leadership × Hindrance stressors), all three lower order terms, as well as main effects, and the moderated curvilinear term was not significant for either moral disengagement ($b = -.00$, $SE = .02$, $p > .05$) or UPB ($b = .02$, $SE = .04$, $p > .05$).

Study 1: Discussion

We set out to clarify how empowering leadership affects UPB via moral disengagement depending on hindrance stressors. The effect of empowering leadership on moral disengagement was positive when hindrance stressors were higher, and negative when lower. The indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB via moral disengagement was also positive or negative depending on hindrance stressors. Study 1 supports our hypotheses in a field setting with external validity but has limitations. First, it does not allow inferences of causality because alternative explanations or reverse causality could exist. Second, we only captured UPB intentions instead of actual behavior. Third, the role of people's pro-self motives in engaging in UPB remains unclear (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Lastly, endogeneity biases could be an issue, which can arise when relevant predictors are omitted, predictors are measured with error, or simultaneous causality is present (Kennedy, 2008; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). To address these limitations, we designed a scenario-based experiment (Chen et al., 2011; see also Brown & Lord, 1999; Shadish et al., 2002), in which we manipulated both independent variables, introduced a third

factor (i.e., the extent to which participants could benefit personally by engaging in UPB, or a "pro-self benefit"), and employed a behavioral UPB measure. We deemed it important to add this third factor to be able to establish that the interaction between empowering leadership and hindrance stressors affected UPB independent of people's pro-self intentions (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Study 2: Method

Participants and Design

We recruited an independent sample of 442 adults (i.e., U.S. residents whose first language was English) from Prolific to participate in exchange for a payment of U.S. $1.20. We screened for careless responses by checking IP addresses (i.e., duplicate entries), using attention checks (i.e., instructed responses), and flagging surveys completed in an implausibly short time (i.e., less than 5 min, a threshold established via pretesting; see Chen et al., 2019; Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019). This led to the deletion of 48 responses, for a final sample of 394 (55% female). Participants' average age was 38.9 years (*SD* = 9.6), 69% had at least a Bachelor's degree (76% Caucasian, 11% African American, 5% Asian American, 3% Hispanic, and the remainder was either Native American or other). The experiment employed a 2 (empowering leadership: low vs. high) × 2 (hindrance stressors: Low vs. high) × 2 (pro-self benefit: low vs. high) between-subjects design with random assignment to one of the eight conditions (*N*s ranged from 45 to 51).

Procedure

We adapted materials from Thau et al.'s (2015) experiment to reflect our theoretical model (see Appendix B for our storyline and manipulations). First, we asked participants to imagine that they were a senior manager in the R&D Division of a company called "*Spark Minds*" that offered online educational tools and apps, and that they reported to the Head of R&D named "Pat Smith." We told them they had been in this job for 4 years, and that Pat had been the division head for several years. We then provided participants with information about an app that their team recently developed that "allowed users to learn languages faster and with more long-lasting results using an anagram-based methodology." Participants also learned that "this app would become Spark Minds new flagship product going forward," and that they "were selected to compete and showcase the app's effectiveness during the final selection round at a very competitive contest held for promising, fast growing companies." Specifically, we instructed participants that they would "compete in a contest (i.e., an anagram task) later in the study that would serve as a demonstration of their app's performance," and that "if they won this contest, Spark Minds would receive a $1 million cash injection from a group of angel investors." We informed them that they would "represent Spark Minds and compete against its competitors (in the form of other participants in this study) to demonstrate their new app's performance." We also reminded them that "winning this contest was the final hurdle to get Spark Minds the much-needed $1 million cash injection and would therefore greatly benefit the company."[5]

Next, we informed participants whether they would personally benefit from their performance in the anagram contest (i.e., our pro-self benefit manipulation, see below). We then told participants how

Pat behaved as a leader and what the typical behaviors were that Pat had displayed over the years, depicting Pat as either very high or low on empowering leadership (i.e., our empowering leadership manipulation). Thereafter, we provided participants with information about their daily work environment, describing it as characterized by either very high or low amounts of hindrance stressors (i.e., our hindrance stressors manipulation). To align our manipulations for empowering leadership and hindrance stressors with the measures used in Study 1, we used the same established scales for these constructs to develop our manipulations as in Study 1. After reading the manipulations, participants completed a series of questions that assessed their moral disengagement, participated in an anagram task, answered questions that served as manipulation checks, and provided demographic information.

Manipulations

We kept the low versus high versions of all manipulations as identical as possible (e.g., tone, length), with only minimal differences owing to describing the respective levels of the variables.

Pro-Self Benefit

To design these manipulations, we built on extant research that manipulated the extent to which participants can (ostensibly) personally benefit from their performance in a task using instructions (Gino et al., 2013; Thau et al., 2015; Wiltermuth, 2011). We informed participants in the high [low] conditions, respectively, that

> given the paramount importance of winning the contest for Spark Minds, the executive board would be extremely grateful if you aced the contest. As such, you winning the contest will be recognized financially by paying you an additional 20% cash bonus [This said, you winning the contest will unfortunately not be acknowledged] beyond your regular salary and compensation package.

Empowering Leadership

To create these manipulations, we built on Kirkman and Rosen's (1999) 14-item measure as well as precedent (Chen et al., 2011, 2019). We informed participants in the high [low] conditions, respectively, that "You and all of your peers agree that your boss, Pat, the Head of the R&D Division, generally is a highly [not an] empowering leader" followed by "examples that best describe Pat's leadership behavior over the years towards you and the department." An example statement for the high [low] condition, respectively, includes "Pat always entrusts [Pat does not entrust] you with many responsibilities and gives you full accountability [or any accountability] for what you do."

Hindrance Stressors

In designing these manipulations, we built on LePine et al.'s (2016) measure. We informed participants in both conditions that "In your capacity as a senior manager in the R&D division at Spark

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[5] The study materials were judged as having high face validity, indicated by participants' scores on a perceived mundane realism item (i.e., "In my professional career, it is realistic that I might experience a leader like the one described in this study"), on which 309 participants (78%) scored 5 ("*Somewhat agree*") or higher, with 224 (57%) scoring above 5.

Minds, your daily work environment is best described as follows." Participants in the high [low] conditions then read statements that were based on the items from LePine et al.'s (2016) scale, such as "You always [never] witness a great deal of [any] office politics."

Measures

Unless otherwise noted, the response scale for all items ranged from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree* (see Appendix C for a full list of instructions and items used).

Moral Disengagement

As in Study 1, we used Moore et al.'s (2012; α = .89) 8-item scale by asking participants what they would probably think or feel in the described situation.

UPB

We operationalized UPB as cheating for the benefit of the organization in an anagram task because they have been used successfully in online studies (Chui et al., 2021; Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014; Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2020; Kugler et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2013) and adapted to reflect pro-group unethical behavior by Thau et al. (2015), which we built on to design our materials. Our cover story depicted the task as the final round of a selection process for fast-growing companies whose winner would receive a $1 million cash injection from angel investors. We made it clear to participants that: (a) they represented their organization (i.e., Spark Minds) and (b) winning the contest would clearly benefit the company because it would lead to Spark Minds receiving a much-needed cash injection (i.e., we described their performance as having direct pro-organizational implications). Before participants reached the page with the task, they were told that they can use pen and paper to help work on the anagrams, had three min to work on them (Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014; Kugler et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2013), and would have to self-report their performance (i.e., we told them that because of the way the survey was designed, we could not know their performance; Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014; Hill & Kochendorfer, 1969; Kugler et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2017; Schweitzer et al., 2004). We also told participants in all conditions that they had to solve a minimum of three anagrams to win the contest (see Bonner et al., 2017; Eisenberger & Shank, 1985; Hill & Kochendorfer, 1969). Participants saw 10 anagrams, based on common English words on the next page, and were asked to solve them. After three min, the page auto-advanced, and we asked them to report the number of anagrams they solved (i.e., to enter a number between 0 and 10). Unbeknownst to the participants, none were solvable. This operationalization of cheating has been widely used in prior work (e.g., Eisenberger & Leonard, 1980; Eisenberger & Masterson, 1983; Eisenberger & Shank, 1985; Kugler et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2017; Pitesa et al., 2013; Wiltermuth, 2011).

Manipulation Check Measures

We asked participants to report their agreement with whether the presented statements accurately described their own benefit from winning the contest, their leader's empowering leadership, and the amount of hindrance stressors they faced, respectively, as described earlier in the study (Chen et al., 2011, 2019). We used four items (α = .97) to create a pro-self benefit; seven items adapted from Kirkman and Rosen (1999; α = .99) as our empowering leadership, and the 10-item scale adapted from LePine et al. (2016; α = .99) as our hindrance stressors, manipulation check measures.

Study 2: Results

Analytic Approach

For moral disengagement as a dependent variable, we ran ordinary least squares regressions. For UPB, we created a dichotomous variable (*noncheating* = 0; *cheating* = 1) and used logistic regression because our fundamental interest was in participants' decisions to cheat for the benefit of the organization versus not cheating (Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2020; Kilduff et al., 2016; Kilduff & Galinsky, 2017; Lu et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2013; Wiltermuth, 2011).[6] Following past research, we report Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 (Bamberger et al., 2018; Sherf & Morrison, 2020; Winterich et al., 2013). Also consistent with past research (e.g., Ruedy et al., 2013), slightly less than half (45%) of our participants "cheated" by reporting having solved one or more anagrams (M = 1.74, SD = 2.49).

Manipulation Check Results

Regressions showed that the pro-self benefit manipulation had a strong effect on its manipulation check, b = 4.64, SE = .10, F (1, 392) = 2152.91, p < .001, Ms = 1.69 vs. 6.32, η² = .85, and no effect on the empowering leadership (b = .07, p > .1, Ms = 3.87 vs. 3.94) or hindrance stressors (b = .05, p > .1, Ms = 3.99 vs. 4.04) manipulation checks. Moreover, the empowering leadership manipulation had a strong effect on its manipulation check, b = 4.70, SE = .09 F (1, 392) = 2719.14, p < .001, Ms = 1.60 vs. 6.29, η² = .87, and no effect on the pro-self benefit (b = .23, p > .1, Ms = 3.88 vs. 4.11) or hindrance stressors (b = −.15, p > .1, Ms = 4.09 vs. 3.94) manipulation checks. Lastly, the hindrance stressors manipulation had a strong effect on its manipulation check, b = 4.65, SE = .09, F (1, 392) = 2520.61, p < .001, Ms = 1.73 vs. 6.38, η² = .87, and no effect on the pro-self benefit (b = .08, p > .1, Ms = 3.95 vs. 4.03) or empowering leadership (b = −.13, p > .1, Ms = 3.97 vs. 3.84) manipulation checks.

Hypotheses Testing

We present descriptive statistics and correlations in Table 3 and regression results in Table 4. We accounted for participants' pro-self motivations to engage in unethical behavior by controlling for the pro-self benefit condition dummy in all our analyses because it was important to rule out that the observed effects were driven by participants' motivations to benefit themselves ("pro-self benefit") versus their organization ("pro-organizational"). Also, running the analyses for both moral disengagement and UPB, respectively, as a dependent variable with the 3-way (Empowering leadership × Hindrance stressors × pro-self benefit) and all three 2-way interaction terms included did not alter the pattern nor significance levels of the results below (all *p*s for the 3-way interaction terms > .1). These

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[6] We also analyzed UPB using participants' raw scores and ordinary least squares regression, and the results remained unchanged.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (Study 2)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. EL condition[a]	0.49	0.50	—				
2. HIN condition[a]	0.49	0.50	.00	—			
3. EL × HIN interaction term	0.24	0.43	.58***	.58***	—		
4. Pro-self benefit condition[a]	0.50	0.50	−.03	−.01	−.03	—	
5. Moral disengagement	2.52	1.11	−.01	.12*	.16**	−.09	—
6. UPB[b]	0.45	0.50	.04	−.02	.13**	−.01	.23***

Note. $N = 394$. Variable 5 was rated on a 7-point scale. El = empowering leadership; HIN = hindrance stressors; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior.
[a] Dummy coded 0 = *low*, 1 = *high*. [b] Dummy coded 0 = *noncheater*, 1 = *cheater*.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

exploratory findings align with our theorizing and support the idea that the Empowering leadership × Hindrance stressors moderation is not qualified by the extent to which people benefit from their unethical behavior themselves.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, the Empowering leadership × Hindrance stressors interaction term was a significant predictor of moral disengagement ($b = .76$, $p = .001$, Model 2), accounting for an additional 2.9% of the variance, $F(1, 389) = 12.06$, $p < .001$. The simple slope of empowering leadership on moral disengagement was positive at high ($b = .35$, $p = .025$), and negative at low ($b = −.41$, $p = .008$), levels of hindrance stressors (Figure 4).

Next, as in Study 1, prior to testing Hypothesis 2, we first examined whether our proposed interaction also directly affected UPB. A logistic regression for UPB, likelihood ratio χ^2 (4, $N = 394$) = 16.85, $p = .002$, revealed that the empowering leadership × hindrance stressors interaction term was significant ($b = 1.64$, $p < .001$; Table 4, Model 4), accounting for an additional 5.3% of the variance (likelihood-ratio [LR] difference test between Models 3 and 4: 15.95, $p < .001$). The simple slope of empowering leadership on UPB was positive at high ($b = .24$, $p < .001$), and negative at low ($b = −.15$, $p = .02$), levels of hindrance stressors (Figure 5).

To test Hypothesis 2, as in Study 1, we obtained conditional indirect effects estimates by multiplying the coefficients for the a and b paths of our model. Moral disengagement positively predicted UPB ($b = .41$, $p < .001$; Table 4, Model 5). The index of moderated mediation was significant, $b = .31$, 95% CI [.12, .62], and the conditional indirect effect of empowering leadership on UPB via moral disengagement was positive, $b = .14$, 95% CI [.02, .35], at high, and negative, $b = −.17$, 95% CI [−.34, −.05], at low, levels of hindrance stressors. The difference was significant, $b = −.31$, 95% CI [−.62, −.12], and results support Hypothesis 2.

Study 2: Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to corroborate our previous findings using an experimental design allowing us to establish causality for our interaction hypothesis, rule out that opportunities for pro-self benefit linked to UPB would drive or qualify hypothesized effects, and corroborate our findings using an established behavioral measure (i.e., an anagram task) to operationalize UPB. The patterns of results were identical to those in Study 1. This bolsters our confidence that the observed effects of UPB and moral disengagement are driven by our independent variables, our findings are robust across methods, and presenting participants with varying degrees of pro-self benefit tied to their UPB did not alter how the hypothesized effects unfold.

General Discussion

Almost all empowering leadership research demonstrates benefits for organizations (Cheong et al., 2019; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015).

Table 4

Regression Results (Study 2)

	Moral disengagement		UPB[a]		
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Intercept	2.51*** (0.11)	2.69*** (0.12)	−0.26 (0.20)	0.12 (0.22)	−0.96** (0.35)
Predictors					
EL[b]	−0.04 (0.11)	−0.41** (0.15)	0.18 (0.20)	−0.62* (0.29)	−0.48 (0.29)
HIN[b]	0.26* (0.11)	−0.11 (0.15)	−0.07 (0.20)	−0.89** (0.29)	−0.88** (0.30)
Pro-self benefit[b]	−0.20 (0.11)	−0.19 (0.11)	−0.02 (0.20)	0.00 (0.21)	0.08 (0.21)
Interaction					
EL × HIN		0.76*** (0.22)		1.64*** (0.42)	1.41*** (0.43)
Mediator					
Moral disengagement					0.41*** (0.10)
R^2	0.023	0.052			
Nagelkerke R^2			0.003	0.056	0.109

Note. $N = 394$. Unstandardized estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. El = empowering leadership; HIN = hindrance stressors; UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior..
[a] Binary logistic regression. [b] Dummy coded 0 = low, 1 = high.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 4

Moderating Effect of Hindrance Stressors on the Relationship Between Empowering Leadership and Moral Disengagement (Study 2)
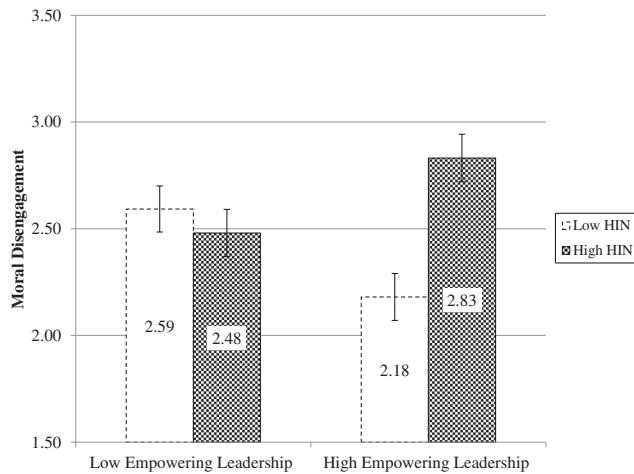
Note. HIN = hindrance stressors condition. Low/High = 0/1. Error bars represent standard errors.

The predominant view among scholars and practitioners is that it is an effective leadership style. Indeed, there has been scant attention to the dark side of this leadership type (Cheong et al., 2016; Lorinkova et al., 2013) likely because the goal of empowering leadership is to enhance employee self-direction, which is generally desirable for employees. Using Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of morality, we challenge this prevailing consensus and, across two studies, find that empowering leadership is positively (vs. negatively) related to employee UPB indirectly through its effects

Figure 5

Moderating Effect of Hindrance Stressors on the Relationship Between Empowering Leadership and UPB (Study 2)
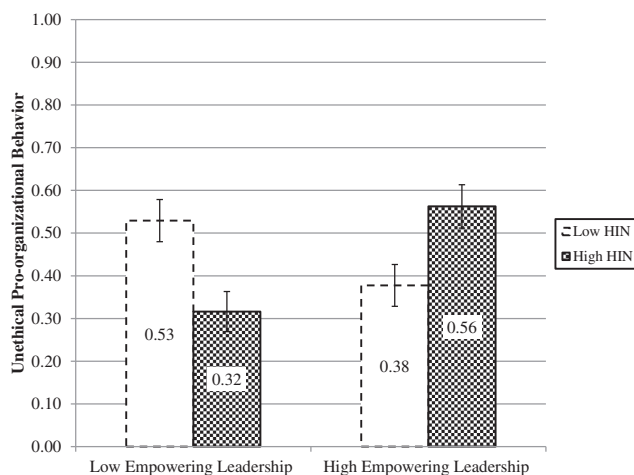
Note. Values represent probabilities. UPB = unethical pro-organizational behavior; HIN = hindrance stressors condition. Low/High = 0/1. Error bars represent standard errors.

on moral disengagement when employees face higher (vs. lower) hindrance stressors.

Theoretical Implications

Our study offers three contributions to the literature. First, we challenge the consensus that empowering leadership is universally positive by showing that it can, in certain circumstances, increase both moral disengagement and UPB. Drawing from Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of morality, we move beyond studies showing that empowering leadership increases job-induced tension (Cheong et al., 2016). Our findings have two implications for theorizing on empowering leadership that are provocative and disturbing.

One, contributing to a rosy picture of empowering leadership is that the field has not recognized that constructs similar to dimensions of empowering leadership can contribute to unethical behavior. Research has shown that autonomy and decision-making authority, leaders' expressions of high expectations and trust, and goal setting when people have unmet goals and are told to do their best or when they have high performance goals can result in ethical lapses (Foulk et al., 2018; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2021; Lu et al., 2017; Pitesa & Thau, 2013a, 2013b; Schweitzer et al., 2004; Shepherd et al., 2013; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). Problematically, empowering leadership research has not acknowledged these tangential, and yet relevant, findings, and we extend the literature by demonstrating that the gestalt construct can cause employees to morally disengage and exhibit a specific type of unethical behavior, UPB. This is theoretically and practically important because it identifies an overlooked class of outcomes of empowering leadership and helps to understand why some empowerment initiatives in today's organizations still do not live up to their originally intended objectives (Argyris, 1998).

Two, identifying moral disengagement as a mechanism by which empowering leadership affects UPB departs from research that, informed by self-determination or empowerment theories, focused on positive mechanisms, such as self-efficacy or empowerment. We find that counterintuitive mediating mechanisms are affected by empowering leadership, thus challenging the way researchers theorize about mechanisms of empowering leadership's intended desirable, and unintended undesirable, effects. Incorporating the notion of empowerment theory that conditions promoting power-lessness be removed before empowering employees (Conger & Kanungo, 1988) helped uncover moral disengagement as an under-lying theoretical mechanism. A fuller integration of other tenets of both empowerment and self-determination theories (e.g., differentiating between types of motivation, such as controlled or amotivation; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagné & Deci, 2005) could shed more light on the dark side effects of empowering leadership by extending our "undesired mechanisms" tenet, thus triggering an overdue consensus shift. Importantly, we were able to establish moral disengagement even when other previously established mechanisms were accounted for, thereby further strengthening our contributions.

Second, drawing from Bandura (1991) and empowerment theory (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), we establish hindrance stressors as a moderator of the relationship between empowering leadership and moral disengagement and depart from theorizing about only

enhancing or diminishing effects. We extend theorizing on empowering leadership by broadening the consideration space of moderation patterns of its boundary conditions to include reversing effects. Given the breadth of the hindrance stressors construct (i.e., it taps several aspects of employees' environment, such as bureaucracy, role ambiguity, coworker relationships, and a lack of organizational resources), it fits Bandura's (1991) notion of the role of situational factors in affecting moral self-regulation skills and efficacy and Conger and Kanungo's (1988) assertions about organizational factors thwarting empowerment. Integrating these notions, such broad-scope deterring factors in employees' jobs likely lead them to feel helpless by suppressing outcome expectancies and look for ways to channel new agency to help their organization, even if morally disengaging and using unethical means as a fallback to achieve desired outcomes.

Our findings also have implications for the social cognitive theory of morality at work. For example, Bandura's (1991) interactionist perspective suggests that the greater moral self-regulation, the more people act in ways consistent with their moral standards. Empowering leadership should be a stimulus of stronger self-regulatory beliefs, as it has been linked to increased psychological empowerment (Chen et al., 2011; Zhang & Bartol, 2010) and efficacy alone (Ahearne et al., 2005). As such, it should render employees more immune to self-regulation impeding situational factors. Our findings show that empowering leadership is not sufficient to overcome the harmful contextual influences of hindrance stressors in determining moral disengagement. Drawing from Bandura, Schweitzer et al. (2004) found that people were unethical after being told they did not reach their goals. They argued that this was to avoid psychological costs from admitting failure to reach them. We extend this research in important ways because our work implies that even factors influencing the *prospect* of potentially not being able to meet one's goals (i.e., hindrance stressors) could lead people to behave unethically.

Lastly, we extend research on UPB antecedents by examining an interaction between a positive workplace feature (i.e., empowering leadership) and a negative one (i.e., hindrance stressors). We move beyond limited attempts to uncover what promotes UPB from a leadership perspective. Research shows that leadership behavior tied to ethics (e.g., ethical leadership, Miao et al., 2013; responsible leadership, Cheng et al., 2019; moral leadership, Wang & Li, 2019) is related to UPB. Although this shows that ethics-laden leadership can affect UPB, and that these relationships vary depending on ethics-related constructs (e.g., value congruence, moral courage), it remains unclear whether positive leadership approaches that do not have an ethical component could backfire and promote UPB, and when this is more likely to occur.

Our examining effects of the interaction between empowering leadership and hindrance stressors affirm this possibility, heeding Umphress et al.'s (2010) call to identify other antecedents to UPB. Such antecedents necessitate contingency factors due to the double-edged sword nature of UPB (i.e., pro-organizational but also unethical). We also contribute to research on antecedents to unethical behavior more broadly. Specifically, past research focused mainly on either individual (e.g., morality) or organizational (e.g., climate, culture) factors (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño, 1986) that could drive unethical behavior, largely omitting the role of more traditional, ethics-free leadership styles, such as empowering leadership, in promoting unethical behavior. Ultimately, this implies that research on UPB should cast a wider

nomological network of potential antecedents to also include leadership behaviors traditionally viewed as "positive."

Managerial Implications

Leaders should be more aware of contextual features in the workplace before using empowering leadership. If employees are likely to experience hindrance stressors when empowered, leaders will need to either (a) use less empowering leadership or (b) reduce effects of hindrance stressors. Regarding the latter, leaders can become sponsors to remove obstacles impeding goal achievement. If bureaucracy is preventing empowered employees from reaching their goals, leaders can reduce red tape to allow more freedom. Leaders can also engage with other leaders to organize a concerted effort to remove hindrance stressors. As noted, Conger and Kanungo's (1988) theoretical model includes removing factors that lead to feelings of powerlessness—many of which pertain to hindrance stressors, such as a lack of role clarity, a bureaucratic climate, or high levels of formalization—as a first step in the empowerment process distinct from behaviors leaders use to empower employees. Yet, applications of empowering leadership often overlook this critical element (Argyris, 1998), which, based on our findings, is problematic. If hindrance stressors cannot be removed, leaders could help employees develop better coping strategies in the face of the frustration they are likely to experience when their goal achievement is thwarted. Coping strategies could include employee support groups, leadership development, or stress management techniques, such as mindfulness (Sutcliffe et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

Like all research, ours is not without limitations. First, although there are many different types and sources of workplace stress (Jex, 1998), we examined only one. We did control for challenge stressors (and their interaction with empowering leadership; see Footnote 3) to rule out their effects, but future research should include other types of stressors. Our focus on hindrance stressors was guided by the social cognitive theory of morality (Bandura, 1991), which pinpoints situational factors that act as contravening influences as critical to moral self-regulation (see also Conger & Kanungo, 1988). However, research should examine other contextual features that could thwart positive empowering leadership intentions (e.g., micromanagers, task routineness).

Second, although we argued that employees would be frustrated that hindrance stressors impeded their ability to achieve goals after being empowered, we did not assess outcome expectancies or emotions directly (Spector et al., 1988). Others should expand our model to include expectancies and emotions. We did find moral disengagement as a direct outcome of the interaction of our independent variables and tested psychological empowerment and role conflict as two alternative mediating mechanisms (see Supplementary Analyses section), and we ran robustness checks with other controls (see Footnote 3). Researchers should explore other possible mediating mechanisms, including serial mediation, explaining how empowering leadership backfires.

Third, we collected all the data using an online platform, which could be a potential limitation because researchers generally have less control over data quality. However, data collected via this method have been shown to be at least as reliable as data collected

via more traditional methods (Behrend et al., 2011; Buhrmester et al., 2011), and we also employed our own screening criteria to identify potentially careless responses following recommendations (Meade & Craig, 2012) and extant practices (Chen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018).

Fourth, Study 1 used all self-reported data, which has the potential for method bias. Research on unethical behavior (Pitesa & Thau, 2013a; Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014), and on moral disengagement and UPB specifically (Detert et al., 2008; Umphress et al., 2010), often relies on self-reports because employees can conceal such behaviors, and thus observer-reports could underreport them. Leadership styles more generally (LePine et al., 2016), and empowering leadership specifically (Zhang & Bartol, 2010), are also typically measured using employee perceptions because leader and employee ratings are often uncorrelated (Tekleab et al., 2008). We required employee perceptions of how much leaders were empowering them to accurately understand relationships between empowering leadership and moral disengagement and UPB. Prior research has frequently relied on self-reports to obtain subjective accounts of stressors employees experience (Cavanaugh et al., 2000), and despite some debate, research on stress still relies primarily on self-reports (Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). We did take several steps to alleviate common method concerns (i.e., use of a time-lagged design, ensuring anonymity, controlling for social desirability; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, interaction effects would be more difficult to detect in the presence of method bias and cannot be artifacts of it (Siemsen et al., 2010). Thus, in testing interaction effects, "method bias would not be able to account for any statistically significant effects observed" (Podsakoff et al., 2012, p. 565). Lastly, by adding an experiment (Study 2), we corroborate our findings across methods (Lykken, 1968) and were able to address our lack of baseline measures in Study 1.

Finally, Study 2's scenario design is necessarily artificial. However, vignettes provide an important means of establishing causality, which is why they are regularly used in top journals. We designed and implemented Study 2 relying on recommendations (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) and best practices (Chen et al., 2011; 2019). Consequently, participants assessed the mundane realism of Study 2 as relatively high (see Footnote 5), mitigating concerns that the scenario was perceived as unrelated to real-life situations. In combination with Study 1, Study 2, ultimately, was important to provide an element of causality (Shadish et al., 2002).

Conclusion

Despite calls to examine the potential dark side of empowering leadership (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015), our study represents one of the first to do so and demonstrates when and why empowering leadership can have a dark side by triggering unethical behavior. Our finding that empowering leadership can lead to such negative outcomes as moral disengagement and unethical pro-organizational behavior should be compelling, and perhaps even shocking, for scholars and practitioners alike. We hope our research inspires more scholarly attention to the dark side of empowering leadership. It is only by uncovering the situational contingencies that influence the light and (hidden) dark sides of empowering leadership that we will fully understand this complex leadership behavior.

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Appendix A

Overview of Instructions and Scale Items Used in Study 1

Empowering Leadership (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999)

Below are several statements about your boss (i.e., your direct line manager, supervisor, or team leader). Please indicate your agreement or disagreement about how characteristic each item is of your boss. In general, my boss …

1. Gives me many responsibilities.
2. Makes me responsible for what I do.
3. Asks me for advice when making decisions.
4. Uses my suggestions and ideas when making decisions.
5. Controls much of my activities. (*R*)
6. Encourages me to take control of my work.
7. Allows me to set my own goals.
8. Encourages me to come up with my own goals.
9. Stays out of the way when I work on my performance problems.
10. Encourages me to figure out the causes/solutions to my problems.
11. Tells me to expect a lot from myself.
12. Encourages me to go for high performance.
13. Trusts me.
14. Is confident in what I can do.

Hindrance Stressors (LePine et al., 2016)

How often do you have to deal with the following demands in your daily work? (1 = Never to 7 = Always)

1. Administrative hassles.
2. Bureaucratic constraints to completing work (red tape).
3. Conflicting instructions and expectations from your boss or bosses.
4. Unclear job tasks.
5. Conflicting requests from your supervisor(s).
6. Inadequate resources to accomplish tasks.
7. Conflict with peers.
8. Disputes with coworkers.
9. Office politics.
10. Coworkers receiving undeserved rewards/promotions.

Moral Disengagement (Moore et al., 2012)

Below are several statements about how you feel in your current job. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each item. In my current job, I typically think or feel that …

1. It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about.
2. Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you are just borrowing it.
3. Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it is hardly a sin to inflate your own credentials a bit.
4. People should not be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do.
5. People cannot be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too.
6. Taking personal credit for ideas that are not your own is no big deal.
7. Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.
8. People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves.

(Appendices continue)

Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior
(Umphress et al., 2010)

Below are several statements about how you typically act or behave in your current job. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each item.

1. If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good.

2. If it would help my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about my company's products or services to customers and clients.

3. If it would benefit my organization, I would withhold negative information about my company or its products from customers and clients.

4. If my organization needed me to, I would give a good recommendation on behalf of an incompetent employee in the hope that the person will become another organization's problem instead of my own.

5. If my organization needed me to, I would withhold issuing a refund to a customer or client accidentally overcharged.

6. If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization.

Control Variables

Amoral Supervisor Behavior (Based on Dahling et al., 2009)

Below are several statements about your boss (i.e., your direct line manager, supervisor, or team leader). Please indicate your agreement or disagreement about how characteristic each item is of your boss. Typically, my boss . . .

1. Is willing to be unethical if she/he believes it will help her/him succeed.

2. Is willing to sabotage the efforts of other people if they threaten her/his own goals.

3. Would cheat if there was a low chance of getting caught.

4. Believes that lying is necessary to maintain a competitive advantage over others.

5. Believes that the only good reason for talking to others is to get information that she/he can use to his/her benefit.

Moral Identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002)

Listed below are some characteristics that may describe a person: CARING, COMPASSIONATE, FAIR, FRIENDLY, GENEROUS, HELPFUL, HARDWORKING, HONEST, and KIND. The person with these characteristics could be you or it could be someone else. For a moment, visualize in your mind the kind of person who has the above characteristics. Imagine how that person would think, feel, and act. When you have a clear image of what this person would be like, answer the following questions.

1. It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics.

2. Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am.

3. I would be ashamed to be a person who has these characteristics. (R)

4. Having these characteristics is not really important to me. (R)

5. I strongly desire to have these characteristics.

6. I often buy products that communicate the fact that I have these characteristics.

7. I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics.

8. The types of things I do in my spare time (e.g., hobbies) clearly identify me as having these characteristics.

9. The kinds of books and magazines that I read identify me as having these characteristics.

10. The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations.

11. I am actively involved in activities that communicate to others that I have these characteristics.

Sincerity (6 Iems From the HEXACO Inventory; Ashton & Lee, 2009)

Below are several statements about you as a person in general. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement about how characteristic each item is of you.

1. I would not use flattery to get a raise or promotion at work, even if I thought it would succeed.

2. If I want something from someone, I will laugh at that person's worst jokes. (R)

3. I would not pretend to like someone just to get that person to do favors for me.

4. If I knew that I could never get caught, I would be willing to steal a million dollars. (R)

5. I would never accept a bribe, even if it were very large.

6. I'd be tempted to use counterfeit money, if I were sure I could get away with it. (R)

Psychological Empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995)

Below are several statements about how you feel in your current job. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each item.

1. The work I do is very important to me.

2. My job activities are personally meaningful to me.

3. The work I do is meaningful to me.

(Appendices continue)

4. I am confident about my ability to do my job.

5. I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities.

6. I have mastered the skills necessary for my job.

7. I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job.

8. I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work.

9. I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job.

10. My impact on what happens in my department is large.

11. I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department.

12. I have significant influence over what happens in my department.

Social Desirability (10-Item Version of Strahan and Gerbasi's Scale, 1972)

Below are several statements about you as a person in general. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement about how characteristic each item is of you.

1. I am always willing to admit it when I make a mistake.

2. I always try to practice what I preach.

3. I never resent being asked to return a favor.

4. I have never been irked when people expressed ideas very different from my own.

5. I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings.

6. I like to gossip at times. (R)

7. There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone. (R)

8. I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget. (R)

9. At times, I have really insisted on having things my own way. (R)

10. There have been occasions when I felt like smashing things. (R)

Challenge Stressors (LePine et al., 2016)

How often do you have to deal with the following demands in your daily work? (1 = Never to 7 = Always)

1. Having to complete a lot of work.

2. Having to work very hard.

3. Time pressure.

4. Having to work at a rapid pace to complete all of my tasks.

5. Performing complex tasks.

6. Having to use a broad set of skills and abilities.

7. Having to balance several projects at once.

8. Having to multitask your assigned projects.

9. Having high levels of responsibility.

10. A high level of accountability for your work.

Appendix B

Study 2 Materials

We used a scenario-based experiment to manipulate our independent variables to establish causality and obtain high internal validity. For the scenario, we positioned the participants as senior managers in the R&D (Research and Development) division at a company called Spark Minds that offers online educational tools and apps. Participants were told that they oversee a team of seven employees and report to the Head of R&D, Pat Smith, who had been in this position for several years. They were also informed that their team had recently developed a new, highly innovative app that allows users to learn languages faster and with more long-lasting results using an anagram-based methodology. All subjects were instructed to compete in a contest (an anagram task) that would serve as a demonstration of their app's performance. If they won this contest, Spark Minds would receive a $1 million cash injection from a group of angel investors. Participants were then presented either a high or a low pro-self incentive in relation to their performance in the contest.

Pro-Self Benefit Manipulations

High Pro-Self Benefit Condition

Given the paramount importance of winning the contest for Spark Minds, the executive board would be extremely grateful if you aced the contest. As such, you winning the contest will be recognized financially by paying you an additional 20% cash bonus beyond your regular salary and compensation package.

Low Pro-Self Benefit Condition

Given the paramount importance of winning the contest for Spark Minds, the executive board would be extremely grateful if you aced the contest. This said, you winning the contest will unfortunately not be acknowledged beyond your regular salary and compensation package.

Participants were then presented with information about their boss, Pat, who was described using several examples as either a high or a low empowering leader in relation to them and the department in general.

Empowering Leadership Manipulations (based on Kirkman & Rosen, 1999)

High Empowering Leadership Condition

You and all of your peers agree that your boss, Pat, the Head of the R&D Division, generally is a highly empowering leader. Here are some examples that best describe Pat's leadership behavior over the years towards you and the department:

- *When you face performance challenges, Pat never interferes and instead always encourages you to figure out causes and solutions to such challenges independently.*

- *Pat always encourages you to aim for high performance and always tells you to expect a lot from yourself.*

- *Pat always trusts you entirely and is very confident in what you can achieve.*

- *Pat is not controlling and instead always encourages you to take charge of your own work.*

- *Pat always entrusts you with many responsibilities and gives you full accountability for what you do.*

- *Pat always allows and encourages you to come up with your own goals.*

- *When making decisions, Pat frequently asks for your advice and very often uses your suggestions and ideas.*

In sum, Pat is a highly empowering leader who, over the years, has always trusted you, encouraged you to aim for high performance, given you a great deal of autonomy and authority, and never interfered with your decisions.

Low Empowering Leadership Condition

You and all of your peers agree that your boss, Pat, the Head of the R&D Division, generally is not an empowering leader. Here are some examples that best describe Pat's leadership behavior over the years towards you and the department:

- *When you face performance challenges, Pat typically interferes constantly and never allows you to figure out the causes and solutions to such challenges independently.*

- *Pat never encourages you to aim for high performance and never tells you to expect a lot from yourself.*

- *Pat controls much of your activities and never encourages you to take charge of your own work.*

- *Pat does not allow nor encourage you to come up with your own goals.*

- *Pat does not entrust you with many responsibilities or any accountability for what you do.*

- *Pat never trusts you and is not confident in what you can achieve.*

- *When making decisions, Pat does not ask for your advice nor use your suggestions and ideas.*

In sum, Pat never was a very empowering leader who, over the years, has never trusted you much, not encouraged you to aim for high performance, given you very little autonomy and authority, and constantly interfered with your decisions.

Following the description of their boss, Pat, participants were told more about their daily work at Spark Minds using situations in which either high or low hindrance stressors prevailed. They were also asked to imagine that they were truly facing this situation.

Hindrances Stressors Manipulations (Based on LePine et al., 2016)

High Hindrance Stressors Condition

In your capacity as a senior manager in the R&D division at Spark Minds, your daily work environment is best described as follows:

- *You typically receive a great deal of conflicting instructions and expectations from upper management.*

- *You always witness a very great deal of office politics.*

- *Coworkers often receive totally undeserved rewards or promotions.*

- *There is constant conflict with your peers.*

- *You never have enough resources to accomplish your tasks.*

- *You always encounter a ton of administrative hassles.*

- *You face huge bureaucratic constraints to completing work (red tape) all of the time.*

- *You often have very unclear tasks.*

- *You constantly receive highly conflicting requests from upper management.*

- *There are always disputes with your coworkers.*

Low Hindrance Stressors Condition

In your capacity as a senior manager in the R&D division at Spark Minds, your daily work environment is best described as follows:

- *You never encounter any administrative hassles.*

- *You hardly ever face bureaucratic constraints to completing work (red tape).*

- *You never receive conflicting instructions and expectations from upper management.*

- *You never have unclear job tasks.*

- *You never receive conflicting requests from upper management.*

- *You always have adequate resources to accomplish your tasks.*

- *There is never any conflict with your peers.*

- *There never are disputes with your coworkers.*

- *You never witness any office politics.*

- *Coworkers never receive undeserved rewards or promotions.*

Participants were then asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statements measuring our mediator variable, moral disengagement. Following the moral disengagement scale, participants were introduced to the anagram task which was our operationalization of UPB.

Task Context, Instructions, Prompt, and Reminder

Context

One of the key features of the app is that it uses anagrams in innovative ways to support the user's learning process in different languages.

Anagrams are word jumbles formed by rearranging the letters of common words in English, using each letter exactly once. The number of solved anagrams is a direct measure of the effectiveness of the app, as it shows that it helps users to learn faster and with more long-lasting results.

You will demonstrate how this feature works from the perspective of a user by competing to solve as many anagrams as possible.

Important:

- You will need to report having solved at least three anagrams, so that Spark Minds will win the $1 million cash injection.

- You will have to self-report your score (number of anagrams solved) after the contest.

Instructions

In the actual contest, you will be presented with 10 anagrams that you need to solve.

You will have a total of 3 min to figure out as many of the original words as possible that each anagram is based on.

Remember that anagrams are composed of the exact same letters as the original words. To find the original word, you will have to use all of the letters in the anagram and use each letter only once.

For example, from the anagram "SHUEO," we can work out the original word "HOUSE."

Prompt

Just as you are about to enter the contest, you receive a phone call from your boss, Pat. After wishing you good luck, Pat emphasizes

that "... it is really important for Spark Minds that you win this contest. Do your best to succeed!"

Reminder

Remember that you will have to report having solved at least three anagrams, so that Spark Minds will win the $1 million cash injection.

The contest will begin on the next page. Before you proceed, feel free to get a pen and paper to use while working on the anagrams.

Important: Because of the way the survey is designed, there is no way for us to know how many anagrams you actually solved other than relying on your self-reported score on the page following the anagrams.

Anagram Task

Welcome to the contest!

Try to solve the 10 anagrams presented below by working out the original words. Report how many anagrams you were able to solve in the text box on the next page.

The more anagrams you report as solved, the greater Spark Minds' chances to win the $1 million cash injection.

The original words are composed of these exact letters. To work out the original word, you have to use all the letters, and make sure you use each letter only once.

This page will auto-advance after 3 min or you can proceed to the next page at any time.

Anagram 1: aurics

Anagram 2: snalagg

Anagram 3: nautce

Anagram 4: golansal

Anagram 5: iamgae

Anagram 6: barkct

Anagram 7: audili

Anagram 8: zpore

Anagram 9: rgreequ

Anagram 10: tehec

Because of the way the survey is designed, we cannot track how many anagrams you actually solved.

In reporting your score, please keep in mind what you learned about your boss, Pat's, leadership style over the years and your daily work environment at Spark Minds, and that your winning the contest will get Spark Minds the much-needed $1 million cash injection from the group of angel investors.

Number of anagrams I solved (please enter a number between 0 and 10): _____

Finally, participants were asked to answer questions related to our manipulation check measures and provide some demographic information.

Appendix C

Overview of Instructions and Scale Items Used in Study 2

Moral Disengagement (Moore et al., 2012)

If I found myself in the situation described on the previous pages, I would probably think or feel that ...

1. It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about.

2. Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you are just borrowing it.

3. Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it is hardly a sin to inflate your own credentials a bit.

4. People should not be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do.

5. People cannot be blamed for doing things that are technically wrong when all their friends are doing it too.

6. Taking personal credit for ideas that were not your own is no big deal.

7. Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.

8. People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves.

Pro-Self Benefit Manipulation Check Measure (Study-Specific Items)

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following statements accurately describe the extent to which you personally could benefit from winning the anagram contest for Spark Minds, as described earlier in the study?

1. I was told that if I won the contest for Spark Minds, I would benefit personally by receiving an additional 20% cash bonus.

2. I read that by winning the contest for Spark Minds, I could earn myself an extra 20% cash bonus.

3. I was told that if I won the contest for Spark Minds, I would NOT benefit personally beyond my regular salary and benefits.

4. I read that by winning the contest for Spark Minds, I could NOT earn myself any additional bonus.

Empowering Leadership Manipulation Check Measure (Adapted From Kirkman & Rosen, 1999)

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following statements accurately describe your boss Pat's leadership behavior, as described earlier in the study?

1. Pat always gives me many responsibilities and full accountability for what I do.

2. When making decisions, Pat frequently asks for my advice and very often uses my suggestions and ideas.

3. Pat never controls my activities and instead always encourages me to take charge of my own work.

4. Pat always allows and encourages me to come up with my own goals.

5. When I face performance challenges, Pat never interferes and instead always encourages me to figure out the causes and solutions to such challenges independently.

6. Pat always encourages me to aim for high performance and always tells me to expect a lot from myself.

7. Pat always trusts me and is always very confident in what I can achieve.

Hindrance Stressors Manipulation Check Measure (LePine et al., 2016)

"To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following statements accurately describe your daily work at Spark Minds, as described earlier in the study?"

1. You always encounter administrative hassles.

2. You face bureaucratic constraints to completing work (red tape) all of the time.

3. You very regularly receive conflicting instructions and expectations from upper management.

4. You always have unclear job tasks.

5. You constantly receive conflicting requests from upper management.

6. You never have enough resources to accomplish your tasks.

7. There is constant conflict with your peers.

8. There are always disputes with your coworkers.

9. You always witness a great deal of office politics.

10. Coworkers very often receive undeserved rewards or promotions.