



# Mutuality in leader–subordinate empowerment expectation: Its impact on role ambiguity and intrinsic motivation<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on leader role set theory, we examine the relationship between the congruence of leaders' and subordinates' empowerment expectations and subordinates' experiences of role ambiguity and intrinsic motivation. Based on cross-level polynomial regression analysis using 168 subordinates and 33 leaders, the results indicated that the relationship between congruence and role ambiguity and intrinsic motivation vary depending on whether leaders misevaluate subordinate empowerment expectations, as well as whether the expectations match. Specifically, subordinates had low role ambiguity and low intrinsic motivation when leaders' and subordinates' empowerment expectations matched at low levels and when leaders underestimated subordinates' empowerment expectations. However, subordinates had low role ambiguity and high intrinsic motivation when expectations matched at high levels. Furthermore, role ambiguity was high and intrinsic motivation was low when the leaders overestimated subordinates' empowerment expectations. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a potential dilemma inherent in empowerment. On the one hand, to mobilize employees, empowerment removes bureaucratic constraints and is praised as an important means to motivate employees (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). On the other hand, empowerment is challenged by increased role ambiguity due to the flexibility it encourages (Collins, 1999). In the literature, the trade-off between the span of control and the level of autonomy is widely debated (Collins, 1999; Wall, Corderly & Clegg, 2002). It is recognized that while empowering leadership, which emphasizes delegation of decision-making responsibilities and removal of bureaucratic control, provides a more robust and dynamic infrastructure, that role ambiguity is one of the major challenges for empowerment initiatives (Corderly, Morrison, Wright & Wall, 2010; Wall et al., 2002). While this trade-off is well recognized, little is actually known about its underlying mechanisms. Therefore, in this study we aim to reconcile these two phenomena by developing a contingency theory of the role of mutuality in leader–subordinate expectations in the face of empowerment. Specifically, we posit that role ambiguity and intrinsic motivation vary contingent on the degree to which leader's perception of subordinate empowerment expectations and subordinate's self empowerment expectations match and on whether the match is at high or low levels of empowerment expectations.

In the process of empowerment, subordinates develop aspirations and expectations (Paul, Niehoff & Turnley, 2000). Subordinates form expectations about how the focal leader should behave to empower them. These expectations influence a subordinate's judgment of leader effectiveness (Tsui, Ashford, St. Clair & Xin, 1995). Leaders, on the other hand, form their received roles based on their perceptions of the role expectations sent with some degree of distortion (Katz & Kahn, 1966). The

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more leaders are aware of the role expectations set by others, the more effective they will be (Tsui et al., 1995). However, a sent – and a received – role expectation may not be mutual and leader–subordinate role expectation gaps can be detrimental to employee outcomes (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000). Despite the potential importance of such gaps, this line of research is lacking in the body of empowerment literature.

Investigating whether the nature of empowerment expectation gaps has implications for role ambiguity and intrinsic motivation, we also set out to contribute to the empowerment literature in two particular ways. First, we aim to motivate further theoretical efforts directed at specifying how empowerment expectations may contribute to subordinate work motivation and their perceived role ambiguity. Several studies have discussed the roles of empowerment expectations (e.g., Labianca, Gray, & Brass, 2000; Paul et al., 2000) and stress that expectation plays an important role in guiding subordinates' cognitive judgment on how much empowerment is appropriate in a given situation and the generation of subsequent cognitive schema toward empowerment. Using the lens of role set theory, we aim to shed light into the role of empowerment expectation and how such expectations can explain subordinates' attitudinal responses to empowerment.

Second, we seek to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between leaders and subordinates in the process of empowerment. With the help of cross-level polynomial regression and response surface analytic techniques (Edwards, 1994; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005), we elicit the interplay between leaders' perception of subordinate empowerment expectations and subordinates' self empowerment expectations in predicting role ambiguity and intrinsic motivation. By doing so, our study sheds light on the role of leaders' awareness and questions whether the oversimplified “the more empowerment, the better” hypothesis may have constrained the understanding of the dynamics of empowerment. Instead, “the narrower the gap between leader and subordinate expectations for empowerment, the better” hypothesis, and/or “the type of the agreement is what matters” hypothesis (in which leaders and subordinates agree at high versus low levels) may provide a more comprehensive picture.

The sample group in the current study consisted of 168 subordinates and 33 leaders within a large manufacturing company. At the time the data were collected, this company had just undergone organizational restructuring and had employed interventions to foster greater employee involvement and responsibility, not only for the products, but also for the production process. As the implementation had been rather recent, the structural changes may not have been fully integrated at the time of data collection. Therefore, many of the individuals, including both leaders and subordinates, were very likely to have been experiencing an adapting phase, in which they were trying to understand what they should expect, with respect to empowerment. This particular adapting phase serves a somewhat unique but appropriate context for this study, as the expectations of empowering leadership at that stage may not have been fully formed among leaders and subordinates within the organization. It is well recognized that organizations are facing a turbulent environment and many are using empowerment interventions to equip themselves to be more flexible and adaptive (Labianca et al., 2000; Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002). Accordingly, this sample should be highly relevant for most contemporary organizations.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

Role set theory suggests that organizations are role systems that involve role sending and role taking (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Each focal position in the organizational structure is presented with a set of role expectations and the focal person as a role taker is assumed to act in relation and in response to these expectations (Tsui, 1984). Expectation is defined as a set of beliefs about an event, a product, or a person (Venkatesh & Goyal, 2010), and almost all individuals are believed to entertain aspirations or expectations of outcomes (Oliver, Balakrishnan & Barry, 1994). In accordance with role set theory, subordinates as members of a role set each constitute expectations of what their focal leaders should or should not do in relation to the various duties and responsibilities (Marginson & Bui, 2009). In other words, these leader role expectations represent standards that subordinates refer to in order to evaluate the focal leaders' performance (Tsui, 1984). Accordingly, role set expectations represent a central element influencing subordinates' judgments of leader effectiveness and their work-related attitudes and behaviors (Tsui et al., 1995).

The influence of intrapersonal and interpersonal differences on role expectations is recognized (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Subordinate expectations are mostly grounded in self-interests that comprise their own work objectives, role requirements, personal goals and other goals in the employment contract (Tsui, 1984). On the other hand, the dyadic relationship between the leader and the subordinate may also influence how the subordinate would shape the expectations toward his/her leader (Katz & Kahn, 1978). As one of the activities in role-sending, subordinates tend to communicate their individual expectations to their focal leaders (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Their focal leaders, as the role takers, would then form their received roles based on their perceptions of the role expectations sent with some degree of distortion (Katz & Kahn, 1966). The degree of distortion can be influenced by numerous factors: First, leaders often interpret the role expectations sent based on the positions of the role senders (i.e., subordinates, peers and superiors) (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Thus, the individual variation in empowerment expectations among subordinates may be neglected. Second, the received role expectations are often modified in various ways by the characteristics of the focal leaders, such as demographics, experiences and expertise (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Previous research has found that the focal leaders tend to share more similar views of role expectations with their superiors than with their subordinates (Marginson & Bui, 2009; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975; Tsui, 1984). The differences in cognitive evaluation of leadership may affect how leaders interpret subordinate empowerment expectations. Accordingly, the processes of role sending and taking often encounter challenges wherein the sent roles and the received roles may not be mutual (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

In the current study, we expand this line of research and investigate empowerment expectation gaps between leaders and subordinates. Empowerment refers to a process in which the one empowering (A) imparts or bestows power to the one empowered

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