Transformational Leadership and Voice

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Transformational Leadership and Voice: When Does Felt Obligation to the Leader Matter?

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Abstract

Drawing on the notion that felt obligation is an important motivation variable that drives employees' behavior, this study examines how leaders can evoke felt obligation in followers and to what extent such obligation can subsequently promote follower voice behavior. Using data from 384 Chinese employees and their 130 managers, we find that followers' felt obligation to the leader (FOTL) serves as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and employee voice behavior and that the mediation effect of FOTL is moderated by followers' power distance orientation (PDO), such that the mediation effect is significant only for employees with low PDO. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords Transformational leadership · Voice · Obligation · Power distance

Introduction

Voice behavior is defined as employees' "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, and opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit function" (Morrison, 2011, p. 715). Leadership behavior has been identified as one of the most important factors that drive employees' voice behavior (Morrison, 2014). In particular, transformational leadership behavior (TFL) has been theorized and reported as a crucial antecedent of voice behavior, because TFL encourages employees to go beyond compliance with formal agreements, motivates

them to improve their skills and abilities, and inspires them to achieve their full potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Several studies have explored the mechanisms through which TFL may influence voice. For example, Detert and Burris (2007) found that the positive relationship between TFL and voice was partially mediated by employee psychological safety. Duan et al. (2017) adopted a Pygmalion perspective and found that TFL influences voice through leaders' voice expectation and employees' voice role perception. Although these studies have enriched our understanding regarding how TFL may influence voice, they have largely focused on followers' self-oriented motives for voice. That is, TFL enhances voice behavior because followers feel safe to do so (i.e., psychological safety) or because they believe that voice is part of their job (i.e., voice role perception).

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We certainly have no arguments with the importance of self-oriented motives for voice. However, according to Morrison's (2011) theoretical model, voice behavior, by definition, is prosocial or other-oriented behavior. Thus, the primary driving motive behind voice is the desire to benefit others, such as the leader, unit, or organization. Indeed, evidence has shown that employee voice is driven by a variety of other-oriented motives, such as felt obligation (Liang et al., 2012) or felt responsibility for constructive change (Fuller et al., 2006). However, previous studies linking TFL with voice (Detert & Burris, 2007; Duan et al., 2017) have exclusively focused on self-oriented motives of voice while leaving the other-oriented motives out of consideration. This gap is surprising, because Morrison (2014) argues that employees' other-oriented motives or sense of obligation should be given central attention and not taken for granted in voice research. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to investigate how transformational leadership (TFL) may promote employees' voice by enhancing their other-oriented motives.

Particularly, we focus on individual-focused TFL, which refers to leader behavior aiming to empower individual followers to develop to their full potential, enhance their abilities and skills, and improve their self-efficacy and self-esteem (Wang & Howell, 2010). According to social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), such behavior is very likely to enhance the follower's sense of obligation to engage in voice behavior, in order to reciprocate the leader's encouraging and considerate treatment. The other-oriented motive may have different targets, but perhaps an important motive for employees' voice behavior is to help the leader. The present study focuses on *followers' felt obligation to the leader (FOTL)*, defined as the extent to which a follower feels a sense of duty and responsibility to help the leader achieve his or her goals (Eisenberger et al., 2001). We propose that followers' FOTL may serve as a mediator through which individual-focused TFL may promote employees' voice behavior.

Furthermore, we identify employees' power distance orientation as a critical boundary condition for the mediating role of FOTL in the relationship between TFL and employee voice. *Power distance orientation (PDO)* refers to the extent

to which an individual accepts that power in organizations is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980). First, we propose that PDO will moderate the relationship between TFL and FOTL, such that this relationship is stronger when the follower PDO is low rather than high. Second, we argue that PDO will also influence whether the follower decides to fulfill his or her obligation to the leader through voice behavior (Li & Sun, 2015). Thus, we propose that follower PDO will also moderate the relationship between FOTL and voice, such that this relationship is stronger when the PDO is low rather than low. In summary, we propose a double-stage moderation model (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2013), in which PDO moderates both the relationship between TFL and FOTL and the relationship between FOTL and voice. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model for our study.

This study makes the following contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to the voice literature by identifying FOTL as an intervening mechanism that mediates the relationship between TFL and voice behavior. By focusing on FOTL as a mediator, our study thus responds to the call for more research on employees' other-oriented motives as the mechanism between leadership behavior and employee voice (Morrison, 2011).

Second, by introducing follower PDO as an important moderator in the relationship between TFL and FOTL, our model sheds light on the nuanced differences in how followers may have different reactions to their leader's TFL behavior. Although several studies have drawn on social exchange theory to explain the positive effects of TFL on follower perceptions and behaviors (Chun et al., 2016; Tse et al., 2013), none of those studies have incorporated potential moderators in their model, thus implicitly implying that the positive social exchange between the transformational leader and the follower is universal for everyone. However, we propose that PDO may influence the social exchange between the leader and the follower, such that it may attenuate the positive effect of TFL on FOTL.

Third, we also contribute to social exchange theory by revealing the condition under which employees may decide to discharge their obligation to the leader through voice behavior. Previous studies have suggested that followers may

Fig. 1 Theoretical model
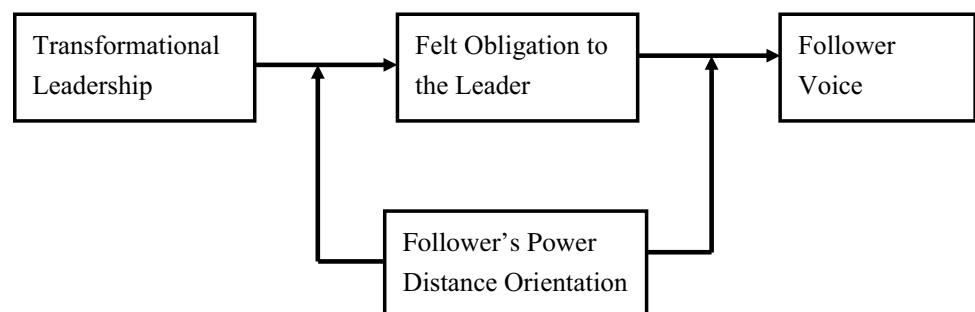
fulfill their obligation to the leader by displaying higher levels of helping behavior (Lorinkova and Perry, 2019), citizenship behavior (Garba et al., 2018), or creativity (Pan et al., 2012). However, the relationship between FOTL and voice behavior is less straightforward given the challenging nature of voice (Burris, 2012). Indeed, the obligated employees may be hesitant to fulfill their obligation by voice behavior because such behavior may upset the leader by challenging his or her authority (Milliken et al., 2003). Thus, we propose that the relationship between felt obligation and voice may depend on the employee's PDO and that followers with low rather than high PDO are more likely to discharge their obligation by voice behavior.

Theory and Hypotheses

Definition of Felt Obligation to the Leader

Social exchange theory argues that felt obligation serves as a key mechanism in social exchanges between the employee and the leader or organization. In one of the most influential theoretical pieces of social exchange theory, Blau (1964) wrote "An individual who supplies rewarding services to another obligates him. To discharge this obligation, the second must furnish benefits to the first in return (p. 89)." This felt obligation is based on the norm of reciprocity that regulates social exchanges (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). That is, person A, who has received help or favor from person B, develops a sense of obligation towards B and seeks to discharge this obligation in the future. Eisenberger et al. (2001) is among the first who introduced social exchange theory to explain the employee–employer relationships. Specifically, they proposed and found that *felt obligation to the organization* mediated the positive relationship between perceived organizational support and employee outcomes (e.g., affective commitment and in-role performance). After Eisenberger's pioneer work, several studies based on social exchange theory have focused on felt obligation as the mechanism in the social exchange process between the leader and the follower. For example, Garba et al. (2018) found that followers' felt obligation mediated the positive relationship between ethical leadership and their customer-oriented citizenship behavior. Pan et al. (2012) reported that felt obligation mediated the positive relationship between LMX and employee creativity. In another study, Zapata et al. (2013) examined social exchange from the supervisor's perspective. They found that supervisor's felt obligation towards a follower mediated the positive relationship between employee trustworthiness and supervisor justice rule adherence. Therefore, drawing on the theoretical argument of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and previous empirical studies (Garba et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2012; Zapata et al., 2013), we focus

on follower's felt obligation to the leader as a mechanism in the social exchange between the leader and the follower.

Eisenberger et al. (2001) applied the reciprocity norm to the employee–employer relationship and defined employees' obligation to the organization (FOTO) as the extent to which an employee cares about the organization's well-being and is motivated to help the organization reach its goals. Drawing on Eisenberger et al.'s (2001) definition of FOTO, we define followers' *felt obligation to the leader (FOTL)* as the extent to which a follower feels a sense of duty and responsibility to help the leader achieve his or her goals. Thus, in accordance with the felt obligation principle of social exchange theory, and in conceptual alignment with Eisenberger et al.'s definition of FOTO, FOTL reflects a sense of indebtedness to another party and a willingness to help achieve the other party's goals. The only difference is that the target of the obligation shifts from the organization (FOTO) to the leader (FOTL).

Furthermore, it should be noted that previous studies (Choi, 2007; Fuller et al., 2006) have found the positive effect on voice of an adjacent concept named felt responsibility for constructive change (FRCC), defined as an individual's belief that he or she is responsible for bringing about constructive change (Morrison & Phelps, 1999). Even though FRCC and FOTL have a sense of obligation in common that serves as a driver for voice behavior, FRCC is conceptually different from FOTL in several ways. First, the scope of FRCC is narrower and more change-specific, whereas FOTL captures the full domain of the follower's duty to help the leader achieve his or her goals. Second, FRCC is self-focused and reflects the extent to which an individual is willing to take personal responsibility for change, whereas FOTL is relation-focused and reflects a feeling of indebtedness of a follower toward the leader. Third, the two constructs are influenced by different antecedents. FRCC is derived from job characteristic theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), which suggests that FRCC is determined by employees' perception of critical characteristics of the work environment such as job autonomy (Fuller et al., 2006) and innovative climate (Choi, 2007). FOTL, in contrast, is regulated by followers' role obligations or social exchange principles, as we will discuss in more depth later.

Definition of Individual-Focused Transformational Leadership Behavior

In this study, we focus on transformational leadership behavior (TFL) as an antecedent of FOTL. Recently, leadership researchers have refined the TFL theory by dividing TFL behavior into two levels: group-focused TFL versus individual-focused TFL (Kunze et al., 2016; X.-H. Wang & Howell, 2012; Zhang et al., 2015). Group-focused TFL behavior communicates group goals, develops shared values

and beliefs among followers, and inspires unified effort to achieve the group goals (X.-H. Wang & Howell, 2010). The influence target of this behavior is the entire group, meaning that the leader exhibits similar behavior toward different members of the group (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). In contrast, individual-focused TFL behavior aims to develop an individual follower's skills and abilities, increase his or her self-efficacy, and empower the follower to achieve his or her full potential (X.-H. Wang & Howell, 2010). The influence target of this behavior is the individual follower, meaning that the leader takes an interest in the specific follower, understands his or her unique characteristics and abilities, and tailors coaching accordingly (Kark & Shamir, 2002). Thus, unlike group-focused TFL behavior, the content of individual-focused TFL behavior may vary across followers.

The present study focuses on the one-on-one interaction that occurs between the leader and the individual follower, and examines the mediation effect of an individual-level motivation variable — namely, followers' felt obligation to the leader. Following prior studies (Chen et al., 2007; Cho & Dansereau, 2010; X.-H. Wang & Howell, 2012), we use *individual-focused TFL* as the independent variable. Individual-focused TFL represents the leader's considerate and supportive treatment to the follower and recognizes each follower's unique strengths, needs, and dreams (X.-H. Wang & Howell, 2010).

Individual-focused TFL has four dimensions (X.-H. Wang & Howell, 2010, 2012). First, *communicating high expectations* demonstrates the leader's expectations for excellence, quality, and high performance in his or her followers. Second, *follower development* aims to enhance followers' skills and abilities. Third, *intellectual stimulation* encourages followers to be creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching challenges in different ways. Fourth, *personal recognition* praises and acknowledges followers for achieving specified goals or discovering new approaches.

Transformational Leadership and Felt Obligation to the Leader: The Moderating Role of Power Distance Orientation

We propose that the extent to which individual-focused TFL will enhance FOTL in followers will depend on followers' *power distance orientation (PDO)*, defined as the extent to which an individual accepts the unequal distribution of power in institutions and organizations (Hofstede, 1980). Originally, Hofstede (1980) conceptualized power distance at the societal level and argued that people living in a particular society or country endorse the power distance value to the similar degree. For example, many Asian societies have been found to have high level of power distance. However, recent research has shown that

considerable variation on power distance exists among individuals within societies (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Individuals with high PDO are more likely to view leaders as possessing absolute power and status. They tend to have a strong deference and obedience to authority (J. L. Farh et al., 2007). In contrast, individuals with low PDO are more likely to view leaders as approachable; they expect to develop equal and personalized relationships with their leaders (Tyler et al., 2000).

Prior research has suggested that employees' PDO is a stable individual characteristic and is not likely to be influenced by contextual variables such as leader behavior (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). In addition, plenty of evidence has shown that PDO may determine how followers react to certain leader behaviors (Kirkman et al., 2009; Lian et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2010). For example, W. Lin et al. (2013) reported that followers' PDO moderated the relationships between abusive supervision and followers' psychological health and job satisfaction, such that the negative relationships were stronger for those with lower PDO. Kirkman et al. (2009) found that followers' PDO moderated the relationship between TFL and followers' procedural justice perceptions, such that the positive relationship was stronger for those with lower PDO. Extending this line of research, we propose that followers' PDO will moderate the relationship between TFL and FOTL, such that the positive relationship between individual-focused transformational leadership and FOTL may be stronger for followers with low PDO.

People with low PDO believe that leaders and followers are relatively equal in the social exchange process and, thus, expect to develop personalized relationships with their leaders (Tyler et al., 2000). Since they are more likely to have stronger social bond with the leader, they tend to apply the norm of reciprocity to the leader–follower relationships (Wayne et al., 1997). Although these individuals also acknowledge the leader's authority and recognize the legitimacy of the hierarchical structure (Wilson et al., 2010), their concept of hierarchical differentiation primarily suggests that the leader and the follower bring different types of resources to exchange. For example, the leader offers support, feedback, and autonomy to the follower; in return, the follower provides effort, performance, and citizenship behaviors (Foa & Foa, 1980). Thus, followers with low PDO are more sensitive to the quality of the treatment they receive from the leader (Kirkman et al., 2009). A transformational leader treats a follower as a real person; understands his or her strengths, needs, and dreams; sets challenging but reachable goals; and provides coaching, feedback, and recognition to help the follower in his or her goal pursuits and competence development (Bass & Riggio, 2006; X.-H. Wang & Howell, 2010). The leader not only cares about the follower's performance, but also evinces genuine interest in the follower's growth. Such considerate treatment from

the leader promotes felt obligation in followers with low PDO. The indebted followers then apply the social exchange principles to the leader–follower relationship and become motivated to repay the leader by helping the leader achieve his or her goals (Greenberg, 1980).

In contrast, followers with high PDO expect one-way and top–down communication from their leader with little explanation or clarification. They tend to maintain greater social distance with authorities and have role-constrained interactions with their leader (J. L. Farh et al., 2007). It should be noted that followers with high PDO may also react positively to TFL behavior and develop a strong sense of obligation to the leader. However, when the leader is not transformational, their responses would be less negative than those with low PDO. This is because high PDO individuals tend to believe that they are naturally obligated to their leader and that they should demonstrate their devotion to their leader by helping achieve the leader's goals, even if the leader does not treat them well (Farh et al., 2007). When TFL is low, their felt obligation to the leader is less strongly influenced by the norm of reciprocity, but rather is guided by role expectations that bind them to show deference, respect, and loyalty to the authority (Tyler et al., 2000). As a result, compared with followers with low PDO, those with high PDO may have a relatively higher level of FOTL even when TFL is low. Indeed, prior evidence has suggested that the positive effect of TFL on followers' perception of procedural justice was weaker for followers with high PDO (Kirkman et al., 2009). Lian et al. (2012) also reported that the negative effect of abusive supervision on subordinates' ratings of supervisory interpersonal justice is weaker for individuals with high PDO. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: Power distance orientation weakens the positive relationship between transformational leadership and felt obligation to the leader, such that the relationship is weaker for followers with higher, rather than lower, power distance orientation.

Felt Obligation to the Leader and Voice: The Moderating Role of Power Distance Orientation

According to SET (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), the obligated employees may actively look for opportunities to reciprocate their leader, in order to discharge their obligation. Indeed, evidence has shown that employees' felt obligation is positively related to their helping behavior (Lorinkova et al., 2019), citizenship behavior (Garba et al., 2018), or creativity (Pan et al., 2012). However, the relationship between obligation and voice may be more complicated due to the paradoxical nature of voice behavior. On the one hand, evidence shows that the leader may reward employees' voice behavior by giving them higher performance appraisal ratings (van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Whiting et al., 2008), mainly because employees who speak up may provide valuable suggestions to improve the unit's or organization's effectiveness or management innovation (Detert et al., 2013; Guzmanet & Espejo, 2019). On the other hand, employee voice may not always be welcomed by the leader because the leader may doubt whether the employees who speak up are truly loyal to the organization (Burris, 2012) or feel exhausted by the problems and complaints received from the employees (Sessions et al., 2020). As a result, it is of theoretical importance to explore the boundary condition under which employees may decide to discharge their FOTL through voice behavior. We argue that the extent to which employees' FOTL will result in voice behavior may depend on their power distance orientation.

Indeed, researchers have recently started to examine how leadership behavior and employees' PDO may interact to influence employees' voice behavior. For example, X. Lin, Chen, Herman, Wei, and Ma (2019) reported that employees' sense of power was positively related to voice behavior only when employees' PDO was low. Extending this line of research, we propose that PDO may also moderate the positive relationship between FOTL and voice, such that the relationship is stronger when the follower's PDO is low.

We argue that followers with low PDO are more likely to engage in voice behavior to fulfill their obligation to the leader. As stated earlier, those followers tend to apply social exchange principles to the leader–follower interaction (Tyler et al., 2000) and are motivated to develop a long-term interpersonal relationship with the leader (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960). We argue that followers with low PDO tend to perceive voice behavior as an appropriate way to fulfill their obligation to the leader. Low PDO followers expect two-way communication with their leader and are willing to become involved in the decision-making process (Lam et al., 2002). They believe that the leader needs and appreciates their input and feedback and that followers should honestly share their thoughts and concerns with their leader (Kirkman et al., 2009). In addition, they may perceive that voice behavior is acceptable to the leader. As a result of all these factors, followers with low PDO view voice as an important way to fulfill their obligation to the leader.

In contrast, the obligated employees with high PDO are less likely to perceive voice behavior as an appropriate way to discharge their obligation to the leader, because they expect all decisions to come from the top (i.e., the leader) and tend to obey the leader's instructions without question (Earley & Erez, 1997). Such individuals may believe that it is not appropriate to disagree with the leader or to change work procedures established by the leader. Their role obligations require them to show deference and obedience to the leader rather than speaking up to share their opinions and ideas (J. L. Farh et al., 2007). Among followers with

high PDO, voice behavior may be perceived as a lack of respect for the hierarchical difference or even an offense to the leader's authority (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Therefore, even when high PDO employees feel obligated to the leader, they are less likely to engage in voice behavior to fulfill such obligation. In summary, it is reasonable to expect that followers with low rather than high PDO will be more likely to engage in voice behavior to fulfill their obligation to the leader.

> *H2: Power distance orientation weakens the positive relationship between felt obligation to the leader and voice, such that the relationship is weaker for followers with higher, rather than lower, power distance orientation.*

To summarize, we propose that PDO moderates not only the path from TFL to FOTL, but also the path from FOTL to voice. Taken together, hypotheses 1 and 2 imply a moderated mediation process (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). PDO is likely to be an important boundary condition that determines whether the mediation effect of FOTL will hold. FOTL is more likely to transmit the positive effect of individual-focused TFL on voice behavior for followers with low PDO, who are more sensitive to their leader's behavior and tend to believe that voice behavior is an appropriate way to discharge their obligation to the leader. In contrast, the mediation effect of FOTL will be weaker for followers with high PDO, because their FOTL is less likely to be influenced by leader behavior, and they may consider voice behavior to represent an offense to the leader's authority. This moderated mediation model clarifies why (via FOTL) and when (low PDO) individual-focused TFL behavior may stimulate follower voice behavior.

> *H3: Power distance orientation weakens the indirect relationship between transformational leadership and follower voice via felt obligation to the leader, such that the indirect relationship is weaker for followers with higher, rather than lower, power distance orientation.*

Methods

Data and Sample

We approached 170 middle-level managers in a variety of organizations in southeastern China through the personal networks of the first two coauthors. Those organizations were from five industries, including trade (14 leaders and 42 employees), service (45 leaders and 135 employees), finance (4 leaders and 11 employees), manufacturing (61 leaders and 179 employees), and education (6 leaders and 17 employees). The sizes of the organizations ranged from

200 to 4000 employees. Each manager was informed about the purpose of the study. If the manager was willing to participate, we first asked him or her to nominate three direct reports. To avoid sampling bias in the nominations, we explicitly asked each manager to nominate one follower with good performance, one with average performance, and one with below-average performance.

In a package including a stamped envelope preaddressed to ourselves, we sent a questionnaire to each of the nominated followers, who assessed their leader's transformational leadership behavior, their felt obligation to the leader, and their power distance orientation. The followers were not aware that they were nominated by their leader based on their levels of performance. To protect confidentiality, followers' names were not printed on the questionnaires and they were asked to send the completed questionnaires directly to us using the preaddressed envelopes within 1 week. The duration of 1 week was mentioned in the questionnaire. To minimize common method variance, followers' immediate managers assessed follower voice. That is, 1 week after the managers had nominated three followers for study participation, we approached those managers again and asked them to evaluate each follower's voice behavior. We used a coding scheme to ensure matched leader–follower data.

Our final sample consists of 384 followers (response rate 75%) and their 130 managers (response rate 76%). All those followers had complete data on all the key variables in our model. Some participants had missing values on one or several demographic variables. We replaced those missing values by the variable mean so that we could include all participants in our data analyses. Each manager in the final sample had 1 to 3 followers. Among the participating followers, 42% were male, the mean age was 29, 42% had a university degree or above, and their average organization tenure was 55 months.

Measures

Transformational Leadership

To measure TFL, we used Wang and Howell's (2010) individual-focused transformational leadership scale. Wang and Howell (2010) divided transformational leadership behavior into individual and group levels and developed separate scales to measure transformational leadership behavior at each level respectively. The individual-focused TFL scale contains four dimensions: communicating high expectations, follower development, intellectual stimulation, and personal recognition. An example item from the follower development dimension is "[My leader] provides me with developmental experiences" (0 = not at all; 4 = frequently, if not always).

Felt Obligation to the Leader

Six items adapted from Eisenberger et al. (2001) were used to assess employees' felt obligation to the leader. As Eisenberger et al.'s measure was developed to assess felt obligation to the organization, we changed the item referents from "my organization" to "my leader." We adopted a referent-shift approach (Chan, 1998; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999), where the referent of items shifts from a group focus to an individual focus. Consistent with our conceptualization of FOTL, the adaptation captured the extent to which an employee felt a sense of duty and responsibility to help the leader achieve his or her goals. An example item is "I feel a personal obligation to do whatever I can do to help my leader achieve his or her goals" (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). We collected additional data to test the distinctive validity between three constructs: FOTL, felt obligation to the organization, and felt responsibility for constructive change. We invited 191 full-time employees to report their FOTL, FOTO, and FRCC. The CFA results showed that the hypothesized three-factor structure had a reasonable fit: $\chi^2[220.07]/df\ [116] = 1.90\ (p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, GFI = 0.89, NFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.07. The standardized factor loading ranged from 0.53 to 0.788 and was all significant (p < 0.05). Although the GFI and NFI were slightly below the recommended value (0.90), all the other indexes met the criteria. More importantly, the results showed that the three-factor model was superior than other alternative models: (a) a two-factor model in which FOTL and FOTO were combined into one factor: $\chi^2[302.55]/df\ [118] = 2.56$ $(p < 0.001)$, $\Delta\chi^2[2] = 82.48\ (p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.86, TLI = 0.84, GFI = 0.83, NFI = 0.79, RMSEA = 0.09; (b) a two-factor model in which FOTL and FRCC were combined into one factor: $\chi^2[274.72]/df\ [118] = 2.33$ $(p < 0.001)$, $\Delta\chi^2[2] = 54.65\ (p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.86, GFI = 0.85, NFI = 0.81, RMSEA = 0.08; (c) a two-factor model in which FOTO and FRCC were combined into one factor: $\chi^2[323.45]/df\ [118] = 2.74\ (p < 0.001)$, $\Delta\chi^2[2] = 103.38\ (p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.84, TLI = 0.82, GFI = 0.82, NFI = 0.77, RMSEA = 0.10; and (d) a one-factor model in which three variables were combined into a single factor: $\chi^2[365.56]/df\ [119] = 3.07\ (p < 0.001)$, $\Delta\chi^2[3] = 145.49\ (p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.81, TLI = 0.78, GFI = 0.80, NFI = 0.74, RMSEA = 0.10. These results indicate that FOTL, FOTO, and FRCC were distinctive constructs. These results suggest that FOTL is indeed different from the other two constructs.

Power Distance Orientation

Following previous studies that have examined PDO at the individual level (Kirkman et al., 2009), we used a 7-item scale developed by Earley and Erez (1997) to measure followers' PDO. An example item is "Managers should make decisions without consulting their subordinates" (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Voice

We used Van Dyne and LePine's (1998) 6-item scale to measure followers' voice behavior. Each leader was asked to rate three followers' voice behavior. However, due to a misprint in the leader questionnaire, one item (i.e., "This employee communicates his/her opinions about work issues to others even if his/her opinion is different and others disagree with him/her.") was omitted for two of the three followers. As a result, 66.4% of the employees in our final sample had missing data on this item. Therefore, this item was deleted, and the final voice score was calculated using the five remaining items. An example item is "[This employee] develops and makes recommendations concerning issues that affect this work group" (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Given the nested structure of our data, we conducted a series of multi-level CFAs to examine the distinctiveness of the three follower-rated variables (i.e., transformational leadership, felt obligation to leader, and power distance orientation). Following Dyer et al. (2005) procedures, we obtained the variance–covariance matrix at the within-group level to compute the fit indices of the measurement model. To maintain favorable item-to-sample-size ratio, we created four parcels for transformational leadership by using the average score on each of the four sub-dimensions (Lorinkova & Perry, 2019). The results showed that the baseline three-factor model fit the data well: $\chi^2[255.97]/\ df\ [116] = 2.21$ $(p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.08. All factor loadings were significant at the 0.01 level.

Against this baseline model, we tested two alternative MCFA models: model 1 was a one-factor model with all the items loading on a single factor and model 2 was a two-factor model with TFL merged with FOTL to form a single factor. The results showed that both alternative models fit the data significantly worse than the baseline model [model 1: $\chi^2[2271.01]/df\ [209] = 10.87\ (p < 0.001)$, $\Delta\chi^2[6] = 1852.19$ $(p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.29, TLI = 0.21, RMSEA = 0.20, SRMR = 0.20, and model 2: $\chi^2[984.09]/df\ [206] = 4.78$ $(p < 0.001)$, $\Delta\chi^2[3] = 565.27\ (p < 0.001)$, CFI = 0.73, TLI = 0.70, RMSEA = 0.12, SRMR = 0.13]. These results support the construct validity of the TFL, PDO, and FOTL measures.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Follower gender	.55	.49								
2. Follower age	29.04	6.24	.11*							
3. Follower organization tenure (month)	55.16	64.92	.01	.71**						
4. Follower education	3.24	.83	.22**	− .20**	− .08					
5. Transformational leadership	2.44	.71	.06	.09	.08	.10	(.95)			
6. Felt obligation to the leader	3.66	.55	.02	.08	.07	.27**	.32**	(.85)		
7. Power distance orientation	2.67	.65	.06	.24**	.16**	− .16**	.05	.01	(.82)	
8. Voice	3.07	.90	− .03	.03	.04	.02	.17**	.15**	− .04	(.91)

Note: $N = 384$. Reliability coefficients (alphas) are on the diagonal. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$

Analytical Approach

All the variables in our conceptual model were at the individual level. However, since supervisors provided voice ratings for more than one employee, the data may be considered nested. The ICC1 for leader-rated voice was 0.30, suggesting that the multiple ratings per leader were correlated. Thus, we conducted multilevel analyses in Mplus with random intercepts and random slopes (Hofmann, 1997). Since the bootstrapping method of resampling cannot be applied to multilevel analyses, we used the Monte Carlo approach of resampling to generate confidence intervals for the significance tests of the moderated indirect effect hypothesis (H3) (Selig & Preacher, 2008). The predictor variables were group-mean centered to analyze the interaction effects (Enders & Tofighi, 2007), and simple slope analyses were conducted to clarify these interactions (Aiken & West, 1991).

Results

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the study's variables. As shown in Table 1, TFL was positively related to FOTL ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$)[1] and voice behavior ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), FOTL was also positively related to voice behavior ($r = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$), and PDO was not related to either FOTL ($r = 0.01$, $p > 0.10$) or voice ($r = − 0.04$, $p > 0.10$). None of the demographic variables of gender, age, organizational tenure, and education

were significantly correlated with the dependent variable of voice behavior.

Hypothesis Testing

To test hypotheses 1 and 2, we estimated a model, in which follower PDO was specified to moderate both the relationship between TFL and FOTL and the relationship between FOTL and voice. Hypothesis 1 predicts that power distance orientation moderates the relationship between transformational leadership and felt obligation to the leader. To test H1, we regressed FOTL on TFL, PDO, and the interaction term of TFL and PDO. As shown in model 1 in Table 2, the interaction term of TFL and PDO was not significant ($b = − 0.08$, $p > 0.10$). Thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported.
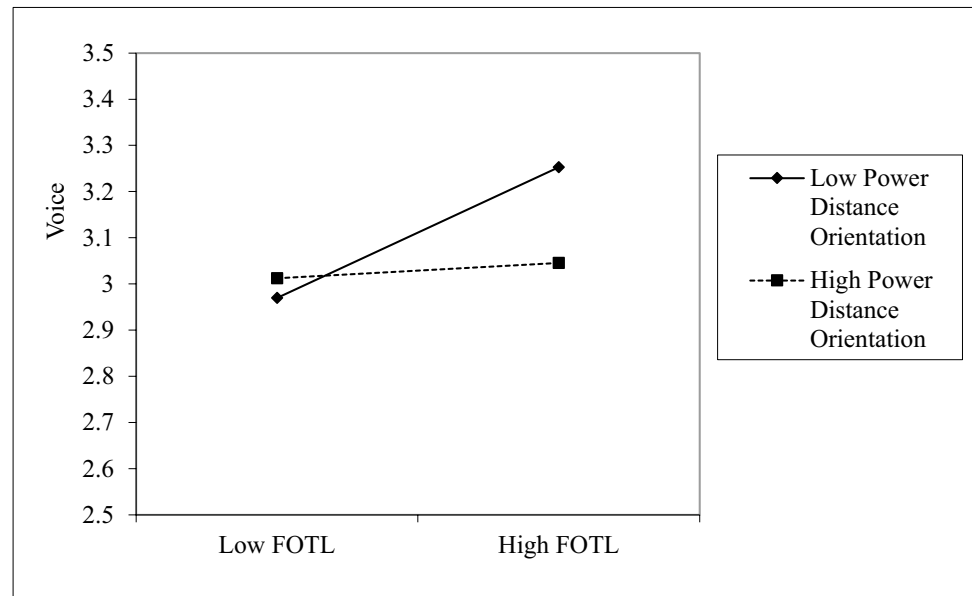
Hypothesis 2 states that PDO moderates the relationship between FOTL and voice. To test H2, we regressed voice on TFL, PDO, FOTL, and the interaction term of FOTL and PDO. As shown in model 2 in Table 2, the interaction term of FOTL and PDO was significant ($b = − 0.55$, $p < 0.05$). This interaction is plotted in Fig. 2. A simple slope test indicated that the relationship between FOTL and voice was

Table 2 Mplus results

	Dependent variables	
	Felt obligation to the leader	Voice
	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	3.66** (.03)	3.07** (.06)
TFL	.30** (.06)	.08 (.09)
PDO	.08 (.05)	− .05 (.09)
TFL × PDO	− .09 (.16)	
FOTL		.21 (.11)
FOTL × PDO		− .55* (.26)

Notes: $N = 384$. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *TFL* transformational leadership, *PDO* power distance orientation, *FOTL* felt obligation to the leader

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[1] We also regressed follower felt obligation to leader on four separate TFL dimensions. The results showed that two dimensions, communicating high expectations ($b = .16$; $p < .05$) and follower development ($b = .17$; $p < .05$), were significantly positively related to felt obligation to leader, whereas the other two dimensions, intellectual stimulation ($b = − .01$; $p > .10$) and personal recognition ($b = − .08$; $p > .10$), were not.

Fig. 2 Interactive effect of felt obligation to the leader and power distance orientation on voice

significant when PDO was low ($b = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$), but not significant when PDO was high ($b = -0.15$, $p > 0.10$). Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that PDO moderates the indirect relationship between TFL and voice via FOTL. Although PDO does not moderate the relationship between TFL and FOTL, the results showed that TFL had a positive main effect on FOTL ($b = 0.31$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, we proceeded to test a second-stage moderated mediation model, with PDO only moderating the effect of FOTL on voice, using the Monte Carlo-based multilevel regression approach (Bauer et al., 2006). We obtained confidence intervals by using 20,000 bootstraps (Selig & Preacher, 2008). The results indicated that the indirect effect of TFL on voice via FOTL was significant when PDO was low (estimate = 0.15, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.34]), but the indirect effect was not significant when PDO was high (estimate = -0.05, 95% CI = [-0.18, 0.08]), with a significant different estimate (difference = -0.21, 95% CI = [-0.48, -0.02]). Thus, hypothesis 3 was partially supported.[2]

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[2] We reran all the analyses with 6 voice items. The results remained largely unchanged: (1) The interaction of FOTL and PDO on voice was significant ($r = -.54$, $p < .05$). A simple slope test indicated that the relationship between FOTL and voice was significant when PDO was low ($b = .55$, $p < .01$), but not significant when PDO was high ($b = -.14$, $p > .10$). Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported. (2) The indirect effect of TFL on voice via FOTL was significant when power distance was low (estimate = .18, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.33]), but the indirect effect was not significant when power distance was high (estimate = $-.04$, 95% CI = [-0.18, 0.07]), with a significant different estimate (difference = $-.22$, 95% CI = [-0.46, -0.02]). So hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

Discussion

To adapt appropriately to dynamic business conditions, stimulate creativity, and identify problems before they escalate, organizations need inputs and information from their employees at all levels. To meet this demand, leaders must address the challenge of how to motivate and encourage their followers to speak up with their opinions, ideas, or concerns on work-related issues. This study sought to discover how followers' PDO operates as a boundary condition for the influence of transformational leadership on voice via FOTL. Our results showed that followers' PDO weakened the relationship between FOTL and voice, but not the relationship between TFL and FOTL. Furthermore, PDO moderated the indirect relationship between TFL and voice via FOTL, such that the indirect relationship was significant only when PDO was low.

Theoretical Contributions

Our results make the following theoretical contributions to the literature. First, drawing on Morrison's (2011) theoretical model which argues that voice behavior is largely driven by prosocial or other-oriented motives, we propose that follower FOTL may serve as a mediator through which TFL, particularly communicating high expectations and follower development, promotes employees' voice behavior. That is, when the leader expresses confidence in the follower's ability to meet high performance expectations and provides coaching and feedback to help the follower develop and improve, the follower may develop a sense of obligation to the leader, which then motivates them to repay their leader by engaging in voice behavior. More

importantly, we identify employees' power distance orientation as a critical boundary condition for the mediating role of FOTL in the relationship between TFL and voice. Taken together, we attempt to answer the call of Griffin et al. (2010) for more studies to examine how the effect of leadership behavior on voice is simultaneously mediated by work motivation variables and moderated by work-related beliefs. Our study adopts this integrative approach to investigate the processes and conditions under which leaders can facilitate follower voice behavior via transformational leadership behavior.

Second, contrary to our hypothesis, PDO does not moderate the relationship between TFL and FOTL. The results showed that TFL is positively related to FOTL regardless of employees PDO. We expected the positive relationship between TFL and FOTL to be weaker for high PDO employees, because the relational model of authority (Tyler et al., 2000) contends that, for high PDO employees, their obligation is guided by role expectations that bind them to show deference, respect, and loyalty to the leader. Thus, it was suggested that high PDO employees tend to believe that they are naturally obligated to their leader regardless of how they are treated by their leader. However, this proposition is not supported by our data. As shown in Table 1, the correlation between PDO and FOTL is not significant ($r = 0.01$, $p > 0.10$), suggesting that high PDO employees do not have a stronger sense of FOTL than low PDO employees. When TFL is low, the leader avoids providing a clear vision and directions for the followers. Such low TFL may fail to activate the felt obligation in high PDO followers to submit to the leader, because the leader does not set up clear expectations to which those high PDO followers can comply. This reasoning suggests that low PDO followers and high PDO followers respond to low TFL with relatively low levels of FOTL for different reasons. This might be an interesting question for future research to examine.

Third, our results suggest that whether the obligated employees will engage in voice behavior also depends on their power distance orientation. FOTL was positively related to voice behavior only for followers with low rather than high PDO. Due to the challenging nature of voice behavior, followers with high PDO may believe that voice behavior is not an appropriate way to discharge their obligation to the leader. Instead, they may choose alternative approaches to help the leader achieve his or her goals. For example, they may comply with the leader's directives, devote extra effort to their own tasks, and complete all the work assigned by the leader with high quality.

Fourth, we contribute to leader–member exchange (LMX) theory by explicitly examining the role of felt obligation in leader–follower interactions. According to LMX theory (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997), the leader–follower relationship is initiated by the leader offering considerate and supportive treatment (e.g., transformational leadership behavior) to the follower, which creates a sense of obligation in the follower. However, most current LMX studies have not examined which leader behaviors may promote a sense of indebtedness in members and in which way the indebted members may repay the leader (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014). Our study directly tested the mechanism of FOTL underlying leader–follower interaction process. Furthermore, our study reveals the moderation effect of follower value orientation (i.e., power distance) in the obligation-laden exchanges between leaders and members. The exchange process outlined in our model, in which transformational leadership behavior motivates follower voice through FOTL, applied only to low PDO employees.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, we used a cross-sectional research design, which precludes any conclusions of causality. Future research should adopt a longitudinal or experimental design to establish the causal effects of TFL on FOTL and voice respectively. Furthermore, the relationship between TFL and FOTL or voice might be reciprocal. That is, the obligated employees may display higher levels of voice and other proactive behaviors, which in turn help them obtain more trust from the leader and receive higher level of TFL behavior. We encourage future research to test this possible reciprocal relationship using panel or longitudinal designs. In addition, future studies should test whether the mediation effect of FOTL will still hold if other previously studied mechanisms in the TFL-voice relationship were controlled for (e.g., psychological safety and voice role perception).

Second, since our data was collected from China, we encourage researchers to replicate our findings using data from other countries, where the average level of employee PDO would be different from that of Chinese employees. Additionally, future studies may explore whether employee PDO may influence employee's voice role perception, defined as the extent to which employees view voice behavior as part of their personal responsibility (Van Dyne et al., 2008). Recent voice literature has divided voice behavior into different sub-dimensions, such as promotive vs. prohibitive voice (Liang et al., 2012), or challenge vs. supportive voice (Burris, 2012). It would be interesting to explore whether employees with different levels of PDO may have different role perceptions for different types of voice behavior, and whether PDO may differentially moderate the effects of leadership (and felt obligation) on different voice dimensions.

Third, although we examined the social exchange processes between leaders and followers, we did not directly measure leader–member exchange in our study. FOTL is

a fine-grained construct that captures followers' sense of indebtedness to the leader, whereas LMX has a broader scope that encompasses followers' affect, loyalty, and respect for the leader (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Future research should examine whether LMX may also mediate the relationship between TFL and voice, and whether followers' PDO will influence the LMX development process between leaders and followers (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017). H. Wang et al. (2005) found that LMX mediated the positive relationship between TFL and followers' performance and citizenship behaviors. However, our findings suggest that this process may not hold for all employees. Notably, Hui et al. (2004) showed that LMX was positively related to organizational citizenship behavior only for followers with low traditionality. Traditionality, an indigenous construct to Chinese people, refers to the extent to which a person endorses the traditional role relationships prescribed by Confucian social ethics (Farh et al., 1997). Traditionality captures followers' deference to authority figures and, therefore, overlaps with PDO. We urge researchers to investigate whether PDO also moderates the relationships between TFL and LMX and between LMX and voice.

Lastly, during the data collection process, we asked each leader to nominate three direct reports with different levels of performance. This sampling approach prevented the leader from nominating only his or her favorite followers. It increased the variance of our sample, which rendered a stronger test of our hypotheses. However, the leaders' ratings of employees' voice might be influenced by their early judgments of the employees' performance. Future research should randomly select followers from each superior to further improve the objectivity in the ratings of voice behavior.

Managerial Implications

The results of this study have several managerial implications. First, it might be necessary for managers to take follower PDO into consideration when they attempt to motivate or interact with their followers. Given the importance of PDO in determining followers' reaction to leadership behavior, leaders need to make an effort to understand the power distance orientation of each of their followers. For those followers with low PDO, leaders will need to initiate positive social exchange by displaying transformational leadership behavior, particularly communicating high expectations and follower development (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Blau, 1964). This behavior will create a sense of obligation in the followers, which in turn will motivate them to engage in voice behavior.

Second, our results show that followers with high PDO are reluctant to speak up in front of their leader, even when they feel that they have an obligation to help their leaders. Organizations may need to set up alternative voice channels

for those employees, because they may be able to propose creative ideas, provide valuable information, and identify important problems (Morrison, 2011). For example, organizations might establish an anonymous voice system (such as an online forum or idea box) in which the identity of the employee who speaks up would be protected. Such a system can ensure that employees with high PDO feel comfortable and safe in sharing their valuable thoughts and concerns with their organization (Detert & Burris, 2007).

Conclusion

This study identifies followers' felt obligation to the leader as a mediator in the relationship between individual-focused TFL and voice behavior. Furthermore, the results showed that followers' PDO moderates the indirect relationship between FOTL and voice via FOTL, such that the indirect relationship is significant only when PDO is low. Our conceptual model illustrates how, why, and when TFL may enhance follower voice behavior. We hope that our work will stimulate future endeavors to advance our understanding of the relationship between leader behavior and employee voice behavior.

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