

Empowering Leadership, Professional Isolation, and Emotional Exhaustion

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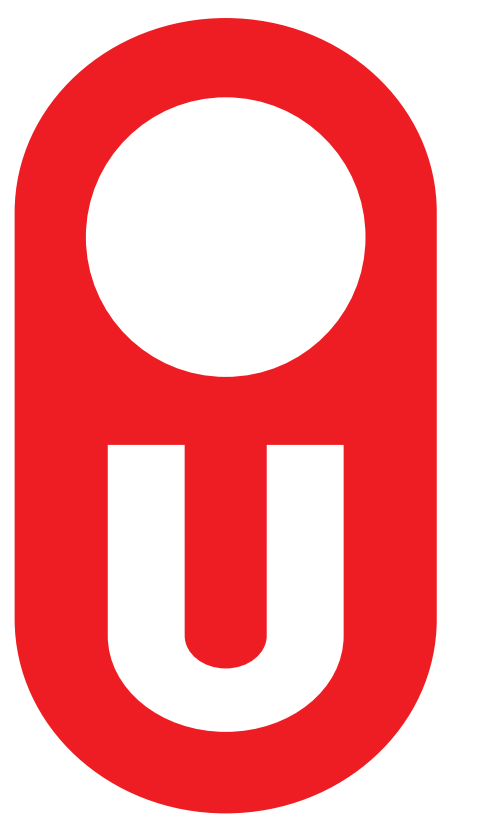
Empowering leadership, professional isolation, and emotional exhaustion: a daily diary investigation

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Introduction and theoretical foundation

Due to the numerous challenges employees are facing during the Covid-19 outbreak, emotional exhaustion is considered to be a serious threat. Therefore, it is vital to gain more insights into how organizations can counteract emotional exhaustion in pandemic settings. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we propose a model in which daily empowering leadership reduces daily emotional exhaustion through daily professional isolation.

According to conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), social resources play a key role in alleviating or preventing work related strain (Hobfoll, Freedy, & Geller, 1990). The basic tenet of COR theory asserts that when circumstances threaten or result in the loss of these resources, individuals experience strain, such as emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Therefore, we expect daily professional isolation to affect daily emotional exhaustion, as professional isolation reflects the lack of sufficient connectedness and work-related contact (Golden et al., 2008).

Furthermore, we expect empowering leadership to have an inhibiting effect on professional isolation. Empowering leadership promotes one's participation in decision making, fosters work autonomy, enhances the meaningfulness of work, and expresses confidence in high performance (Ahearne et al., 2005). By doing so, empowering leaders provide support to their subordinates (motivate social interactions) and contribute to a strong sense of connectedness (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011). Drawing on COR-theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), we expect empowering leadership to be a vital condition within the work environment that provides connectedness and social support and thus mitigates professional isolation, which in turn indirectly reduces emotional exhaustion.

Research Questions

- Hypothesis 1** Daily empowering leadership negatively relates to daily professional isolation
- Hypothesis 2** Daily professional isolation positively relates to daily emotional exhaustion
- Hypothesis 3** Daily professional isolation mediates in the relationship between daily empowering leadership and daily emotional exhaustion

Methods

- Daily diary design.
- 39 (n = 39) employees from a variety of companies in the Netherlands provided daily scores, for a period of ten consecutive working days.
- Only days in which there was contact with the leader were included, leading to 231 (n = 231) daily observations.
- Measurement scales:
 - Empowering leadership*, 3 items from Ahearne et al. (2005), previously used in diary designs (e.g. Schilpzand et al., 2018) (avg. $\alpha = .71$, ranging from .55 - .86)
 - Professional isolation*, 3 items adapted from Golden et al. (2008) (avg. $\alpha = .90$, ranging from .83 - .98)
 - Emotional exhaustion*, 3 items selected from Maslach and Jackson (1981), based on highest factorial loadings (Schutte et al., 2000) (avg. $\alpha = .85$, ranging from .77 - .95)
- The measurement model was superior over all alternative models (see Table 1)
- To analyse the data, we performed multilevel path analysis in Mplus

Table 1 Model comparison

	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	Δdf
3 factor model	58.77	48	.99	.98	.03	.04	
2 factor model (professional isolation and emotional exhaustion combined)	192.87	52	.85	.79	.11	.11	4
2 factor model (empowering leadership and emotional exhaustion combined)	235.68	52	.80	.72	.12	.14	4
2 factor model (professional isolation and emotional exhaustion combined)	308.96	52	.72	.61	.15	.13	4
1 factor model	439.92	54	.58	.44	.18	.17	6

Results

Table 2 Means, standard deviations and within-level correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Empowering leadership	3.27	.84			
2. Professional isolation	2.26	.99	-.25***		
3. Emotional exhaustion	2.19	.80	-.13*	.36***	

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

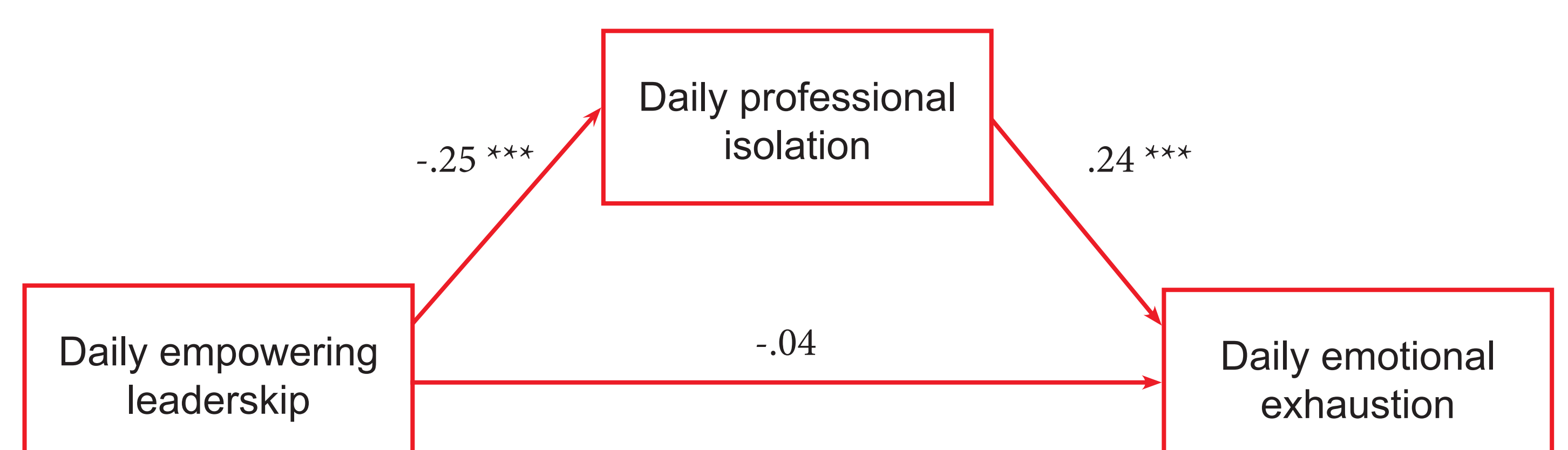


Figure 1 Results of the mediation model analysis

The indirect effect for *daily empowering leadership* → *daily professional isolation* → *daily emotional exhaustion* was significant ($\beta = -.06$, $p < .01$)

Main conclusions

- Daily professional isolation was positively related to daily emotional exhaustion.
- Daily empowering leadership was negatively related to daily professional isolation.
- We found that daily empowering leadership indirectly contributes to the reduction of emotional exhaustion through professional isolation.

Implications

- The loss of social resources such as connectedness to work and social support, which is reflected in professional isolation, results in emotional exhaustion.
- In the context of a pandemic, when working remotely is the only option, leaders are advised to engage in empowering behaviours to reduce employees' exhaustion (indirectly) and to help them deal with professional isolation experiences.
- This can be done, for instance, by affording employee autonomy, allowing them to participate in making decisions, and asking them for input.

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