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The Dark Side of Empowering Leadership: How Empowering Leadership Affects Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior in Construction Projects

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Abstract: The success of construction projects heavily depends on the compliance of parties with ethical codes of conduct. Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) may serve as a barrier to close collaboration between parties. Although empowering leadership is generally considered to be beneficial to project management, this study argues that empowering leadership may unintentionally increase the tendency of employees to adopt UPB. The aim of this study is to uncover the influencing mechanism underlying empowering leadership and UPB by introducing the mediating role of role stress. It is hypothesized that empowering leadership can enhance employees' role stress, thereby increasing the engagement of UPB. Moreover, organizational goal clarity can ease the negative effect of empowering leadership. With data collected from experienced construction professionals, the results of the covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) supported the hypothesis. The findings help in understanding why employees may adopt unethical behaviors when they feel high levels of role stress that are caused by empowerment. Theoretically, the study enriches the literature on empowering leadership and UPB in the construction context. In practice, managers are reminded about the adverse effect of empowering leadership on employees' unethical behaviors. Organizational management tools are suggested to assist in assigning work appropriate to employees' roles. Regular checks and feedback about organizational goals are also necessary to confirm compliant behaviors and progress.

Keywords: construction project; empowering leadership; organizational goal clarity; role stress; unethical pro-organizational behavior

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1. Introduction

Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB) refers to unethical behaviors that individuals engage in to benefit their organizations or members [1]. It contains a "good" intention to protect or pursue organizational interest; however, it leads to a "bad" consequence with unethical actions. In construction projects, employees may face multiple challenges, such as uncontrollable external environments, changing project demands, schedule stress, or other potential risks [2]. When it is difficult to meet requirements in a compliant way, construction employees may resort to UPB to achieve specific goals. They may misrepresent project progress, cover up safety or quality issues, conceal project environmental violations, or falsify reports. Even though these can bring about short-term profits, some destructive impacts, such as conflict escalation, reputational damage, occurrence of safety accidents, or even project failure, can be expected [3]. The success of construction projects relies heavily on the compliance of parties with ethical codes of conduct; exploring UPB in the construction context thus remains a significant research topic.

Considering the labor-intensive and project-oriented nature of construction projects, the leader–member relationship could have an important effect on the adoption of UPB [4]. Fehr, et al. [5] indicated that leadership, as well as employee performance, can be the core reason for the formation of an organizational system. The main antecedents of UPB seen at the leader–member level can be summarized; these include ethical leadership, organizational identity, organizational commitment, and moral judgment [3,6]. However, these findings mainly focus on stable and relatively permanent organizations. For temporary organizations, like in construction projects, employees have to work more flexibly to satisfy the changing requirements and to balance the interests of different parties. In this regard, more attention should be paid to the empowering leadership that can create empowered and autonomous work environments. Most of the existing research highlights the positive sides of empowering leadership, which links to self-efficacy, creativity, work engagement, and employee satisfaction [7–10]. Some scholars challenged the uniformly beneficial role of empowering leadership and hinted that adverse effects may occur from unregulated empowering behavior [11,12]. However, limited evidence can be found on how empowering leadership affects employees' UPB, especially in the construction industry. Uncovering the underlying influencing mechanism between empowering leadership and UPB can aid in alleviating unethical actions and promoting effective project management from the leadership perspective.

Therefore, this study strives to explore the dark side of empowering leadership that underpins employees' tendency to engage in unethical pro-organizational actions. Specifically, empowerment from leaders may increase employees' duty orientation, which drives them to serve the organization beyond the expectations or responsibilities initially imposed on them [13–15]. When employees become aware that their limited resources and capabilities cannot fulfill the different role expectations, role stress may arise [16]. To alleviate the role stress caused by empowerment, employees may adopt UPB. In this regard, role stress (including role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity) can potentially mediate between empowering leadership and UPB. In addition, this study suggests that organizational goal clarity—meaning the extent to which an organization clearly states the job goals—can moderate the relationship between empowering leadership and role stress. This study thus involves organizational goal clarity as the boundary condition (i.e., moderator) to manifest a more real project situation.

This study investigates the dark side of empowering leadership on the employees' adoption of UPB. For this purpose, the study is developed based on the following conceptualizations: (1) UPB has an adverse effect on construction projects that should be carefully managed; (2) Highly empowered employees may experience greater role stress and hence resort to UPB to fulfill their role demands and organizational interests; (3) Organizational goal clarity would play a positive role to ease the dark side of empowering leadership on role stress, thus lowering the chance of UPB. Accordingly, the relationships among empowering leadership, role stress, UPB, and organizational goal clarity are tested in the context of construction projects. The findings not only contribute to the limited research examining unethical behaviors from the leadership perspective but also shed light on managerial implications about how management should behave to regulate the UPB of subordinates.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Empowering Leadership

Empowering leadership refers to a range of leadership behaviors intended to encourage greater employee self-direction [17], including promoting autonomy and participation, sharing power and control, expressing confidence, high expectations, and trust [18–20]. Numerous scholars have suggested that empowering leadership always brings positive outcomes. For example, Kim and Beehr [21] applied empowerment theory to production planning and demonstrated that empowerment can positively affect the planning reliability and scheduling performance of the project. Based on the resource conservation theory, Zheng, Gu, Zhang, Xie, Li and Li [20] noted that empowering leadership promotes project

performance by motivating employees' creative self-efficacy. Research on empowering leadership paints a rosy picture for project organizations. However, it has been noted that some researchers have challenged this view in non-project settings. Conger and Kanungo [22] found that unregulated empowerment could lead to subordinates' overconfidence, causing strategic errors. Zheng, et al. [20] suggested that empowered employees would experience increased duty orientation, ultimately driving them to participate in unethical behaviors. This study argues that in the project setting, the issue of whether empowering leadership has potential dark sides that could lead to UPB remains unclear.

2.2. Role Stress

Roles are the employees' perceptions of the patterns of behavior that the role sender expects them to perform [23]. Role theory states that role stress occurs when individuals find that their limited resources cannot fulfill these expectations. It involves three dimensions: role overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity [16].

2.2.1. Role Conflict

Role conflict occurs when people face incompatible role expectations in different social positions [24]. It creates a dilemma in decision making and resource allocation as the assigned tasks clash with one another. Stress may result as people have to trade off the performance of one role for the other [25]. In construction projects, taking the role of quantity surveyor as an example, it is their duty to provide accurate project costs and timelines. However, they often face role conflict when the owner requests cost or time reductions that may compromise the accuracy of the estimate. Communication and interactions between different parties, supervisors, and colleagues are necessary for employees to balance their roles with varying expectations.

2.2.2. Role Overload

Role overload indicates when the employees' limited resources or abilities cannot support them in fulfilling their responsibilities or assigned workload [26]. In other words, the requirements are beyond their work time, capabilities, or other constraints. Work overload is quite common in the construction industry; for example, when implementing schedule compression to meet the expected deadline or bearing work from two or more projects at the same time. Even when the tasks are clear and compatible with employees, a massive workload still leads to negative effects on their emotions, work quality, and overall performance [27].

2.2.3. Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity refers to the lack of clarity, certainty, and predictability regarding (a) the work objectives associated with the role, (b) the expectations of colleagues regarding the job role, and (c) the scope and responsibilities of the job role [26,28,29]. In practice, many construction projects are subcontracted, resulting in multiple layers of authority and organizational hierarchies. This phenomenon carries the chance that employees have to work across different departments within different project organizations. In such conditions, employees may be confused about which leader to report progress to or to seek guidance from, as well as what responsibilities to prioritize.

Role stress, no matter which type it is, is prevalent and can negatively affect employees' moods [30,31]. As demonstrated by existing studies, role stress is generally characterized as a troublesome or disruptive stimulus that adversely affects the concentration, physiology, and mood of employees. For instance, Xiao, et al. [32] suggest that role stress may contribute to psychological distress that increases employee burnout. As noted by Tang and Li [33], role stress can lead to employee emotional exhaustion, depression, and diminished performance at work. High levels of role stress have some potential for employee mood fluctuations and changes in behavior patterns, thereby triggering unethical behavior. Furthermore, some studies have identified stress as a possible consequence of empowering

leadership [34]. Therefore, by drawing on existing research, this study will explore the mediating mechanisms of role stress to explain the mechanism influencing empowering leadership and UPB.

2.3. Unethical Pro-Organizational Behavior

UPB is defined as actions that are designed to promote the effective functioning of an organization or its members while violating societal values, moral norms, laws, or appropriate standards of behavior [1]. In general, UPB contains two key components: violations of ethical codes and standards and voluntary pro-organizational behavior. According to Umphress and Bingham [1], UPB in construction projects can be considered as employees sacrificing ethical standards to maximize organizations' interests. For example, to obtain additional payments from the owner, the contractor may inflate the amount of work or report work that has not been completed. It should be noted that UPB encompasses actions to benefit the organization; however, unethical behaviors with self-serving purposes should not be involved. Typically, UPB can be summarized as omission (e.g., concealing negative information that is harmful to the organization) and commission (e.g., falsifying favorable information that benefits the organization) [35].

The adoption of UPB is generally explained by the social identity theory, in which individuals define themselves based on their organizational membership [36]. It is suggested that individuals having a high level of organizational identification would conceive a compelling desire to protect their organizations [1]. The sense of belonging and oneness can thus be the psychological antecedent that motivates UPB in the workplace. This study examines whether and how empowering leadership affects UPB in the context of construction projects.

2.4. Organizational Goal Clarity

Organizational goal clarity is defined as the extent to which the organization clearly states and defines its work outcome goals and objectives [37]. Organizational goal clarity has attracted considerable attention from diverse sectors and theoretical backgrounds [38,39]. Frank, et al. [40] argued that clear organizational goals can be a valuable complement to work information that contributes to a cooperative atmosphere and increases productivity within the organization. Furthermore, clarifying goals can help employees better understand their roles and responsibilities, improve focus, and facilitate organizational communication [41,42]. In contrast, if there are unclear goals but multiple roles taken on, employees have to expend additional resources to determine the appropriate work approach and direction. In this study, organizational goal clarity is considered to be beneficial in alleviating role stress as well as the tendency for UPB.

3. Development of Hypotheses

3.1. Empowering Leadership and Role Stress

Along the project process, project organizations need to deal with several challenges, including technical difficulties, schedule pressures, as well as changes in stakeholder demands and regulatory requirements [43]. In this case, empowering leadership requires employees to adjust their role positions rapidly to assume new roles or to expand original role contents as circumstances dictate [15]. Furthermore, it is necessary for employees to maintain a balance between the old and the updated roles and to perform both with limited resources. However, there may be conflict and inconsistency between the demands and goals of these roles. Employees may feel that meeting the requirements of one role interferes with achieving the objectives of another, thereby leading to role conflict. Moreover, employees' existing skills and knowledge may not be sufficient to assist them in balancing the priorities among various roles, further aggravating role conflict. As a result, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1a. *Empowering leadership is positively associated with role conflict.*

Empowering leadership requires employees to handle more tasks and responsibilities by providing more autonomy and decision-making power [44]. Empowered employees have to spend additional energy considering how to allocate limited resources as well as dealing with disruptions from the external environment, which increase their workload and work difficulties. Additionally, construction projects often require intense collaboration and communication with organizations from various disciplines of expertise [45]. Empowering leadership encourages employees to actively participate in interdisciplinary tasks and decision making to promote collaboration and work efficacy [46]. As a result, in addition to performing their original duties, employees have to take on additional responsibilities and tasks in unfamiliar areas and to deal with excessive workloads. As a result, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1b. *Empowering leadership is positively associated with role overload.*

Construction projects are inherently complex and uncertain. In such circumstances, empowering leadership encourages employees to respond to changes proactively [47]. However, employees may not receive clear guidance on the role framework, authority, and responsibility distribution [48]. In this case, they may feel confused about the specific boundaries of the different duties, goal achievements, and resource allocations associated with their role. Especially when facing additional requirements, employees who lack clear instruction may be uncertain about whether they are required to take on extra work, whether they can exercise decision-making authority, and which departments they will need to coordinate with. As a result, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1c. *Empowering leadership is positively associated with role ambiguity.*

3.2. Role Stress and UPB

Employees with role conflict typically have to consider balancing the conflicting demands and responsibilities of their multiple roles [49]. In general, role conflict can be viewed as the competing demands and expectations of interests that are placed on employees by different stakeholders, all of which are difficult to satisfy simultaneously. Thus, it is necessary for employees to determine the priorities of various conflicts. Nevertheless, in the highly competitive and resource-constrained construction industry, project organizations are performance-oriented and more focused on achieving their objectives, completing projects promptly, and maximizing profits. Thus, among the conflicting expectations and goals, employees may prioritize their own organization's interests and performance [50] and neglect other factors, such as ethical codes, which increase their likelihood of engaging in UPB. As a result, this study suggests that:

H2a. *Role conflict is positively correlated with UPB.*

In construction projects, employees with role overload need to undertake multiple job demands simultaneously. However, self-control theory suggests that high job demands consume limited self-control resources [51,52]. With the depletion of resources, employees would suffer from fatigue and ego depletion, reducing their ethical judgment and decision-making skills [53]. Therefore, their decisions regarding the project may deviate from moral standards. Furthermore, employees may be unable to accomplish organizational goals on time due to the combination of high workloads and limited resources. Therefore, it is inevitable that they will choose UPB to achieve organizational goals and interests. This study thus proposes that:

H2b. *Role overload is positively correlated with UPB.*

Employees with role ambiguity may be uncertain about their specific role demands, objectives, and duties. It is imperative that they continuously mobilize resources to obtain work-related information and detailed directions to meet organizational interests [54]. However, the resources available to employees for completing tasks in construction projects, such as time, budget, personnel, and equipment, are generally limited [55]. As a result of devoting too many resources to obtaining work information, employees may be concerned about whether they have enough resources to complete organizational tasks as planned [56]. Thus, to achieve organizational goals and safeguard organizational interests, employees may actively engage in unethical practices. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2c. *Role ambiguity is positively correlated with UPB.*

3.3. Mediating Effects of Role Stress

Empowering leadership is inferred to positively influence role stress, including role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity. Meanwhile, the three types of role stress are suggested to result in UPB. This implies that role stress can play a mediating role between empowering leadership and UPB. As a result, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3a. *Role conflict mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and UPB.*

H3b. *Role overload mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and UPB.*

H3c. *Role ambiguity mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and UPB.*

3.4. Moderating Role of Organizational Goal Clarity

Lee et al. [57] suggested that clear organizational goals can not only assist employees in understanding the organization's shared vision and mission, but also motivate employees to share valuable information, knowledge, and resources with each other. As a result, better collaboration will occur among employees with different work skills, relieving their role stress. Furthermore, according to the goal-setting theory, employees who have a better understanding of the organization's overall goals are more likely to align their work efforts with organizational goals [58]. Clear organization goals also help employees to understand what is expected of them, what behaviors are valued by the organization, and how they can contribute to goal achievement [59]. Under these circumstances, the decision-making power provided by empowering leadership can be viewed as a positive resource by employees. This is because they would have sufficient autonomy to prioritize the goals of different roles, formulate strategies to reduce conflict between roles, and establish timely communication mechanisms with other partners based on their practical abilities and the organization's ultimate goals. They can also adapt their work direction and resource allocation plan according to the responsibilities and tasks of their roles autonomously and continuously to achieve the organization's interests. Consequently, a certain level of empowerment and clear goal guidance enable employees to organize their tasks flexibly, experiencing less role stress. As a result, this study proposes that:

H4a. *Organizational goal clarity has a moderating effect on the relationship between empowering leadership and role conflict.*

H4b. *Organizational goal clarity moderates the relationship between empowering leadership and role overload.*

H4c. *Organizational goal clarity moderates the relationship between empowering leadership and role ambiguity.*

Summarizing these hypotheses, this study argues that a high level of empowering leadership may lead to employee role stress at work, resulting in an increased tendency to adopt unethical pro-organizational behaviors to achieve the desired outcomes. Moreover, it is suggested that providing clear organizational goals can ease the relationship between empowering leadership and employee role stress, thus alleviating its negative effect of adopting unethical behaviors. Figure 1 presents the conceptual research framework.

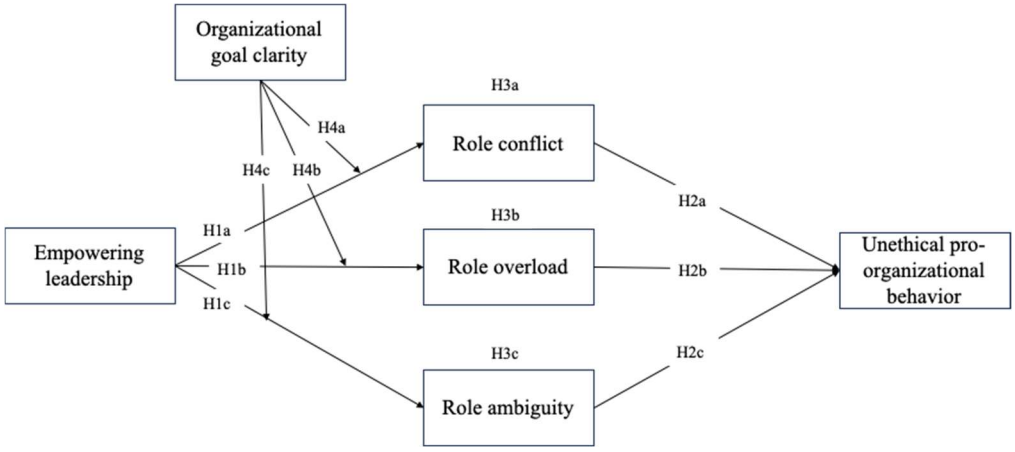

Figure 1. Conceptual research framework.

4. Method

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

The survey method was used in this study to test the proposed hypotheses. The measurement items for the constructs were taken from the literature and adapted for the construction industry. Specifically, a four-item measure was developed to test empowering leadership from the work of Li, et al. [60] and Rapp, et al. [61]. In terms of role stress, the measurement items were obtained from the research by Chow, et al. [62], Wang, Jiang, Zhu and Song [29], and Li, Soomro, Khan, Han and Xue [60]. For UPB, a three-item measure was adopted based on the research of Umphress [63]. Measurement items for organizational goal clarity were adopted from Shi, et al. [64] and Tang, et al. [65]. All the items were designed using five-point Likert scales ("1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree"). The Likert scale is one of the most basic and commonly used psychological measurement tools in social science research [66].

As the original items were in English, this study followed the "translate-back–translate-revise" principle to ensure that the Chinese items reflected the original English items accurately. Additionally, as a means of making the questionnaire more relevant to construction practice as well as to academic requirements, four construction industry professionals and three engineering management scholars were invited to review the questionnaire. As a result of their feedback and suggestions, inappropriate wording was corrected in the questionnaire to produce the final version.

The questionnaire included two parts. Part A asked for basic information about the respondents and projects. Part B asked respondents to recall a recent project they had been involved in and to answer questions about empowering leadership, role conflict, role overload, role ambiguity, UPB, and the clarity of organizational goals. Potential respondents were practitioners from the organizations of the owner, contractor, and consultant. An online survey was issued in Mainland China from August 2022 to November 2022. A mixed sampling method, including purposive and snowball sampling, was conducted to ensure the quality of the responses [67]. The initial participants, including 32 project managers and contract managers from different construction projects, were purposely selected through the professional networks of the authors. The snowball sampling method was then applied by requesting these participants to forward this survey to their qualified colleagues, aiming to maximize the sample size. To encourage honest responses, participants were explicitly

informed that their responses were anonymous and that the collected data would be used only for research purposes. Furthermore, they were assured that there was no right or wrong answer. In total, 336 questionnaires were returned. After removing invalid responses with duplicate or missing data, 213 valid questionnaires were left, with a valid response rate of 63.39%. This amount of data is considered sufficient, as 213 is more than five times the item number ($n = 22 \times 5 = 110 < 213$), which is the minimum dataset recommended by Carpenter [68].

As shown in Table 1, respondents with different roles were from varying construction project types. This ensures the randomness of the sample and reduces the interference by certain types of project characteristics. A total of 181 (84.98%) respondents had more than five years of project work experience, indicating that most respondents had a solid understanding of construction projects and were able to make persuasive judgments. Table 1 illustrates detailed information about the demographics of respondents.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Features	Category	Quantity	Percentage
Project type	General Construction Work	107	50.23%
	Industrial Plant Engineering	37	17.37%
	Traffic Engineering	24	11.27%
	Power Engineering	18	8.45%
	Other	27	12.68%
Work experience	<5 years	32	15.02%
	6–10 years	135	63.38%
	11–15 years	21	9.86%
	>15 years	25	11.74%
Educational background	High School and below	45	21.13%
	Undergraduate	115	53.99%
	Master's degree or above	53	24.88%
Role in the project	Project Leader	42	19.72%
	Project Contractor	93	43.66%
	Project Designer	36	16.90%
	Consulting Organization	22	10.33%
	Other	20	9.39%
Position in the organization	Senior Management	22	10.33%
	Middle Management	49	23.00%
	Executive Level	123	57.75%
	Other	19	8.92%

4.2. Construct Reliability and Validity Measures

SPSS 23.0 and Mplus 7.4 software were used to analyze the data. The Cronbach's alpha of each construct was examined to assess the internal consistency reliability of the measurements. The Cronbach's alpha values shown in Table 2 were all greater than 0.7 [69], indicating good internal consistency reliability.

Validation factor analysis was used to test the validity of the items, assessing the composite and discriminant validity of the measures, respectively. Composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) analyses were employed to reflect the composite validity of the model. As shown in Table 2, all CR values were more significant than 0.7 (ranging from 0.893 to 0.925), and all AVE values were more significant than 0.5 (ranging from 0.677 to 0.805), indicating satisfactory convergent validity. All items have significant standardized loadings of more than 0.7 (Table 2), which are above the threshold of 0.5 recommended by Hair, et al. [70]; consequently, the measurement items reach satisfactory levels of indicator reliability.

Table 2. Measures of reliability and validity assessment.

Construct and Measurement Items	Loading	α	AVE	CR
Empowering leadership		0.895	0.685	0.896
1. My supervisors urged me to be responsible for my assigned work tasks on my own	0.811			
2. My supervisors encouraged me to solve problems when they popped up without approval.	0.734			
3. My supervisors encouraged me to find solutions to problems at work without their direct input.	0.862			
4. My supervisors believed that I could handle demanding work tasks.	0.894			
Role conflict		0.892	0.677	0.893
1. I balanced incompatible requests from different partners in the project.	0.802			
2. I worked with partners who operated differently in the project.	0.817			
3. I worked under incompatible goals in the project.	0.856			
4. I made decisions that could not satisfy all partners in the project.	0.815			
Role overload		0.894	0.693	0.900
1. I felt I had too many tasks and maybe was less careful to get everything done.	0.764			
2. I felt that the number of problems I dealt with was more than expected.	0.835			
3. I felt exhausted after I finished the work.	0.818			
4. I felt stressed by the project work	0.906			
Role ambiguity		0.925	0.805	0.925
1. I worked under vague directives or orders.	0.888			
2. I was not sure whether the process and results of my work would satisfy my superiors.	0.909			
3. I felt uncertain about how much authority I had to handle work affairs.	0.895			
Organizational goal clarity		0.899	0.694	0.900
1. Our organization established specific and clear general goals.	0.810			
2. Our organization divided general goals into several detailed milestones.	0.908			
3. Our organization emphasized its goals to employees in different forms.	0.789			
4. Our organization provided timely guidance if achieving goals deviated from the plan.	0.819			
Unethical pro-organizational behavior		0.896	0.742	0.896
1. If it helped my organization, I would exaggerate the truth about its products or services to my partners.	0.823			
2. If my organization needed me to, I would conceal from partners that it could not completely perform contracts.	0.863			
3. If necessary, I would ignore the interests of other partners for the benefit of my organization.	0.897			

Note: Loading refers to the standardized loading of each issue.

Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the AVE value for each construct and the correlation of that construct with other constructs [71]. Table 3 shows that the square roots of all the AVE values were higher than the correlation values, indicating that the discriminant validity is acceptable. Therefore, structural equation modeling can be used to investigate the association between empowering leadership, role stress, and UPB.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics—square root of the average and Pearson's correlation matrix.

	Mean	SD	EL	RC	RO	RA	OGC	UPB
EL	3.593	0.907	**0.685**					
RC	3.729	0.768	0.778 **	**0.677**				
RO	3.524	0.860	0.563 **	0.741 **	**0.692**			
RA	3.132	1.00	0.323 **	0.421 **	0.658 **	**0.905**		
OGC	3.293	0.961	0.242 **	0.221 *	0.016	0.147 *	**0.693**	
UPB	3.214	0.745	0.406 **	0.466 **	0.613 **	0.693 **	0.003	**0.742**

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; SD = standard deviation; boldface signifies that the square roots of the AVE are greater than the off-diagonal correlations. EL: Empowering Leadership; RC: Role Conflict; RO: Role Overload; RA: Role Ambiguity; OGC: Organizational Goal Clarity; UPB: Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior.

4.3. Common Method Bias

Since data was collected through self-reported questionnaires, common method bias (CMB) may influence the results of this study [72]. Procedural remedy and statistical techniques were used to examine the CMB. In this study, procedural remedies were adopted to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality to reduce social desirability bias.

Following the recommendations of Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff [72], a one-factor test using the CFA was conducted to statistically test the occurrence of common method bias. All items on the questionnaire were loaded based on a single factor to form a one-factor model and then compared with the baseline model. The fit indices for the one-factor model were as follows: $\chi 2/df = 9.825$, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.444, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.497, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.204. These values were significantly worse than those of the baseline model ($\chi 2/df = 2.256$, TLI = 0.921, CFI = 0.934, RMSEA = 0.077). Thus, procedural remedies and statistical techniques confirmed that CMB was not a serious problem in this study. The comparison results of the different measurement models are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of measurement models.

Model	χ2	df	χ2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
Baseline model	437.594	194	2.256	0.077	0.934	0.921	0.046
Five-factor model	957.086	199	4.810	0.134	0.793	0.76	0.11
Four-factor model	1036.066	203	5.104	0.139	0.773	0.742	0.094
Three-factor model	1561.039	206	7.578	0.176	0.631	0.586	0.139
Two-factor model	1819.073	208	8.746	0.191	0.561	0.512	0.147
One-factor model	2053.473	209	9.825	0.204	0.497	0.444	0.151

Notes: Five-factor model: RC and OGC merged into one factor; Four-factor model: RC, RO, and RA merged into one factor; Three-factor model: RC, RO, RA, and OGC merged into one factor; Two-factor model: EL, RC, RO, RA, and OGC merged into one factor; One-factor model: EL, RC, RO, RA, OGC, and UPB merged into one factor. EL: Empowering Leadership; RC: Role Conflict; RO: Role Overload; RA: Role Ambiguity; OGC: Organizational Goal Clarity; UPB: Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior.

5. Data Analysis Results

A covariance-based structural equation model was developed to test the hypotheses with the software Mplus 7.4 [68].

To provide a more rigorous test, the bootstrapping technique was applied to test the significance of the path coefficients. The bootstrap procedure with 5000 re-samples was used in this study [73,74]. The critical t-value for a two-tailed test is 1.96 (significant level = 0.05). The path coefficient would be considered significant when the p value is less than 0.05. Moreover, the results of 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals were also checked. If the range between the lower bound and the upper bound does not include zero, the null hypothesis that the corresponding path estimate is equal to zero in the population can be rejected, indicating the significance of the proposed hypothesis. Table 5 and Figure 2 show the CB-SEM data analysis results.

Table 5. Path coefficients and significance.

Hypothetical Path	β	Standard Error	*p* Value	95% Bias–Corrected Confidence Interval	Interpretation
Direct effects					
H1a: Empowering leadership → Role conflict	0.655	0.044	0.000	[0.565, 0.736]	Supported
H1b: Empowering leadership → Role overload	0.487	0.076	0.000	[0.325, 0.625]	Supported
H1c: Empowering leadership → Role ambiguity	0.281	0.081	0.001	[0.116, 0.431]	Supported
H2a: Role conflict → UPB	0.330	0.094	0.000	[0.147, 0.511]	Supported
H2b: Role overload → UPB	0.523	0.073	0.000	[0.367, 0.656]	Supported
H2c: Role ambiguity → UPB	0.564	0.061	0.000	[0.441, 0.677]	Supported
Mediating effects					
H3a: Empowering leadership → Role conflict → UPB	0.622	0.177	0.000	[0.297, 0.986]	Supported
H3b: Empowering leadership → Role overload → UPB	0.733	0.139	0.000	[0.498, 1.061]	Supported
H3c: Empowering leadership → Role ambiguity → UPB	0.456	0.148	0.002	[0.194, 0.776]	Supported
Moderating effects					
H4a: EL × OGC→ Role conflict	−0.075	0.066	0.253	[−0.196, 0.067]	Not supported
H4b: EL × OGC→ Role overload	−0.181	0.083	0.029	[−0.343, −0.021]	Supported
H4c: EL × OGC→ Role ambiguity	−0.032	0.092	0.726	[−0.216, 0.150]	Not supported

Note: EL × OGC represents the product of empowering leadership and organizational goal clarity.

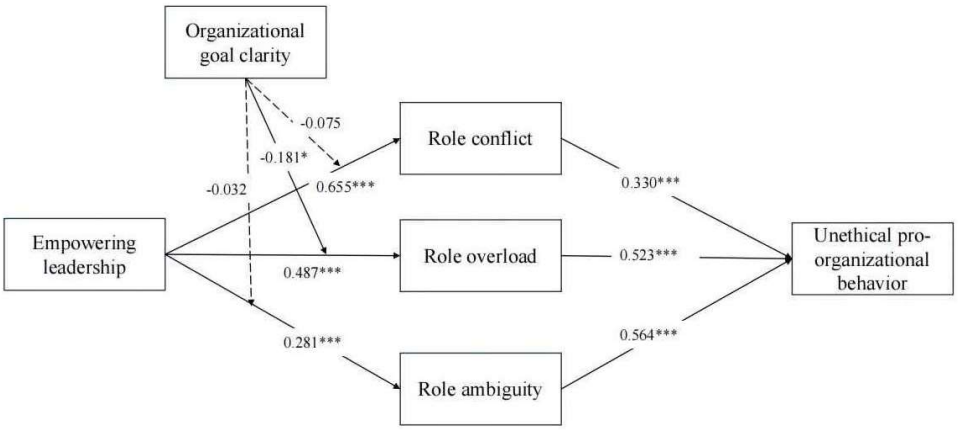

Figure 2. Research framework with path coefficient results. Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; solid lines indicate the significance of path coefficients; dashed lines indicate that they are insignificant.

H1a, H1b, and H1c proposed relationships between empowering leadership and role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity, respectively. Results indicated that empowering leadership is positively associated with role conflict (β = 0.655, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.565, 0.736]), role overload (β = 0.487, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.325, 0.625]), and role ambiguity (β = 0.281, $p = 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.116, 0.431]). Therefore, H1a, H1b, and H1c were supported.

H2a, H2b, and H2c predicted that role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity influence UPB, respectively. Results show that role conflict (β = 0.330, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.147, 0.511]), role overload (β = 0.523, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.367, 0.656]), and role ambiguity (β = 0.564, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.441, 0.677]) can positively influence the engagement of UPB. Thus, H2a, H2b, and H2c were supported.

H3 pointed out that role conflict (H3a), role overload (H3b), and role ambiguity (H3c) mediated the relationship between empowering leadership and UPB. As predicted, role conflict (β = 0.622, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.297, 0.986]), role overload (β = 0.733, $p < 0.001$, 95% confidence interval = [0.498, 1.061]), and role ambiguity (β = 0.456, $p < 0.01$, 95% confidence interval = [0.194, 0.776]) can mediate the relationship with empowering leadership significantly. The mediating effects (i.e., H3a, H3b, and H3c) were all supported.

H4 postulated that organizational goal clarity can ease the positive influence of empowering leadership on role conflict (H4a), role overload (H4b), and role ambiguity (H4c). However, the results show that the interaction effects of empowering leadership and organizational goal clarity on role conflict (H4a: β = −0.075, $p = 0.253 > 0.05$, 95% confidence interval = [−0.196, 0.067]) and role ambiguity (H4c: β = −0.032, $p = 0.726 > 0.05$, 95% confidence interval = [−0.216, 0.150]) were not significant. Thus, H4a and H4c were rejected. H4b was supported (β = −0.181, $p = 0.029 < 0.05$, 95% confidence interval = [−0.343, −0.021]), indicating that organizational goal clarity can only affect the relationship between empowering leadership and role overload. To further understand the supported moderating effect, the slope chart was plotted in greater detail, as shown in Figure 3. As can be seen, the line labeled "High Organizational Goal Clarity" has a milder gradient than that labeled "Low Organizational Goal Clarity", indicating that when the goal clarity is higher, the positive relationship between empowering leadership and role overload becomes weaker, hence supporting H4b.

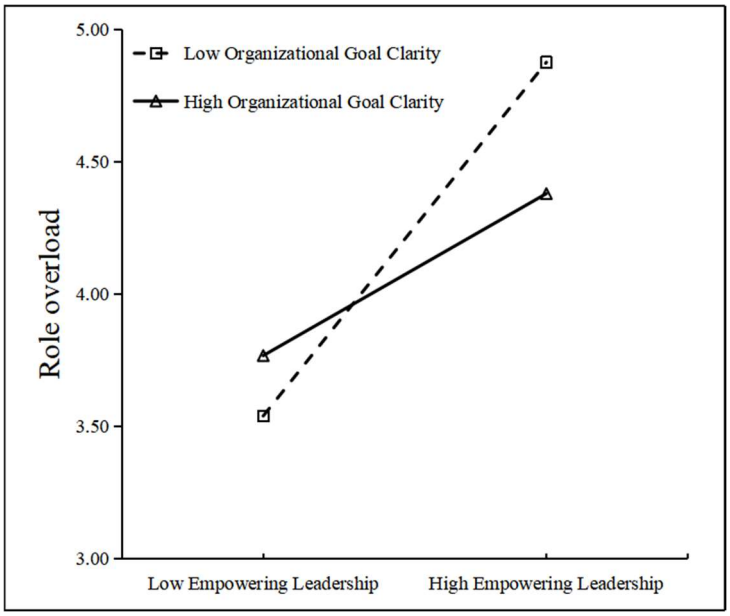

Figure 3. The moderating effect of organizational goal clarity.

6. Discussion

Generally, this study examined the effects of empowering leadership and role stress on UPB. The findings and implications of this study are provided as follows.

6.1. Findings

In this study, it was found that empowering leadership can lead to role stress for employees (H1). Most previous research has assumed that empowering leadership could positively influence project organizations. Nevertheless, this study challenges this assumption and suggests that empowering leadership also has potential dark sides. Empowering leadership encourages employees to take on more responsibilities, participate in broader work processes, and become self-leaders. Empowered employees may have to perform multiple tasks and roles simultaneously with limited resources and coordinate and balance the conflicting requirements and priorities of each role, resulting in role conflict (H1a) and role overload (H1b). Additionally, empowering leadership that lacks clear role definitions and guidelines can cause employees to be uncertain about each role's specific responsibilities and boundaries, thus leading to role ambiguity (H1c). This finding is consistent with the views of Aryee, et al. [75], who found that organizations that emphasize autonomy and power distribution positively impact employees' role stress. This study also empirically supports the viewpoints of Sharma and Kirkman [17] that empowering leadership may have unintended consequences.

The findings also suggest that high levels of role stress can contribute to the adoption of UPB (H2). This is in line with the findings of Barsky [76] and Welsh and Ordonez [77] that, when feeling constantly under pressure to meet excessive demands, employees may perceive it as reasonable to perform their duties at the expense of other parties' profits. Furthermore, high workloads or multiple roles consume excessive mental and physical resources of employees, resulting in a loss of moral self-control when making decisions. Consequently, they are more likely to adopt unconventional methods (e.g., UPB) to achieve organizational objectives (H2a, H2b). This also echoes the ego depletion theory proposed by Baumeister, et al. [78], which suggests that individuals' moral consciousness will be compromised once limited self-regulation resources are exhausted, resulting in unethical behavior [79,80]. Finally, as indicated by the social role theory [81], individuals are more likely to disregard ethical standards when they are uncertain about their roles and responsibilities. In this regard, employees with role ambiguity may not be certain whether

the resources assigned will contribute to achieving organizational goals, resulting in the engagement of UPB (H2c). The mediating effect of role stress was also demonstrated (H3).

In addition, this study confirmed that organizational goal clarity could mitigate the adverse effects of empowering leadership on role overload (H4b). Clear organizational goals can facilitate employees' understanding of the organization's shared vision and encourage frequent communication and resource sharing among employees. This can assist employees in cooperating with others and achieving their work goals. However, the moderating effect of organizational goal clarity on the empowering leadership–role conflict and empowering leadership–role ambiguity relationships were insignificant (H4a, H4c). One possible explanation is that organizational goal clarity cannot guarantee that employees know the requirements of their roles or have the ability to balance the priorities of their roles. Moreover, the organization may fail to establish two-way communication and feedback mechanisms. As a result, employees cannot obtain timely feedback and guidance regarding their performance, which prevents them from adjusting and improving their performance.

6.2. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several significant contributions to the project management literature. First, previous studies on empowering leadership conducted in construction projects have mainly emphasized its positive aspects. This study conducted an empirical test to confirm its adverse effects on UPB. The findings extend existing construction management literature on empowering leadership and deepen the understanding of the applicability of empowering leadership in construction project organizations.

Second, UPB is a sensitive issue that is rarely discussed in the construction management domain. In light of the potential hazards of UPB, this study proposes that empowering leadership affects employees' role stress levels, ultimately resulting in their adoption of UPB. Furthermore, by emphasizing the need for in-depth research into UPB, this study assists in attracting the attention of scholars and practitioners to UPB.

Third, previous research has generally identified factors such as organizational identification and reciprocity as potential mechanisms for describing the effects of empowering leadership on UPB. By summarizing the existing literature on the adverse effects of empowering leadership and the antecedents of UPB, this study recognizes that negative psychological states are essential perspectives through which empowering leadership can be linked to UPB. Therefore, this study suggests exploring role stress to examine the influence of empowering leadership on UPB, contributing to the body of knowledge.

Finally, this study provides valuable evidence that, given clear organizational goals, employees may feel less role overload caused by empowering leaders. It opens up new perspectives on applying empowering leadership scientifically. In addition, this study reinforces and enriches existing research regarding the boundary conditions of empowering leadership; mainly, how to ease the adverse effects of empowering leadership.

6.3. Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications. Based on the findings of this study, empowering leadership can increase employees' role stress levels, therefore resulting in UPB participation. In this regard, it is necessary to curb UPB in terms of rational empowerment and reducing role stress. For leaders, they are required to consider the practical limitations and requirements of each task and to assess the abilities and experience of employees to allocate the appropriate workload. To achieve that, some project management tools, such as project planning software or task management software, can be adopted. With these tools, leaders can monitor task progress, assign workloads, and optimize resource utilization more effectively, thus alleviating employees' role stress. In addition, it is useful to construct a role matrix, including the details of each employee's role, their dependencies, reporting relationships, and the distribution of authority and responsibility among them. This can help to reduce role conflict and role ambiguity.

Clarifying organizational goals on a daily basis can also be a useful way in light of the finding that organizational goal clarity has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between empowering leadership and role stress. Leaders are recommended to set goals jointly with their employees to ensure that the goals are specific, measurable, and achievable for both the team and the employees. Moreover, regular feedback and recognition would be necessary to confirm their progress and achievements.

7. Conclusions and Limitations

7.1. Conclusions

This study examines the influencing mechanism of empowering leadership on UPB in construction projects. Based on the adverse effects of empowering leadership and the characteristics of the construction industry, it is hypothesized that empowering leadership could lead to employee participation in UPB, which is mediated by role stress. These propositions are supported by the data collected from practicing construction professionals. Key findings of the study are that empowering leadership may increase employees' role stress levels, which may lead to the tendency to engage in UPB. Thus, to curb UPB in construction projects and create a positive ethical climate, organizational leaders should wisely use empowering leadership by analyzing the competencies of their employees and assigning appropriate jobs. Furthermore, given the mitigating effect of organizational goal clarity, the communication of clear objectives and timely feedback would also be beneficial. The findings complement the knowledge of empowering leadership by uncovering its dark side in eliciting unethical behaviors in construction projects. Suggestions are provided to mitigate employees' engagement in UPB.

7.2. Limitations and Future Directions

The study has several limitations and can provide information for future research. First, in a typical construction project, there are different parties involved. This study did not distinguish between the various project organizations. Future studies can examine the UPB tendencies of different project parties separately. Second, in addition to the empowering leadership proposed in this paper, other leadership styles, such as authoritarian leadership and benevolent leadership, may also influence behavioral tendencies. Furthermore, employees' personalities can be measured based on the Myers–Briggs types or Keirsey's temperaments, which may provide further information about the leader–member relationship. These issues could be explored in future works to gain a better understanding of the empowerment and decision making in construction project organizations. Third, the study used data collected from Chinese professionals with extensive experience in the construction industry. Therefore, the findings may have greater validity in a Chinese context. However, values and humanistic perspectives may differ in different institutional, legal, and cultural contexts. Therefore, future research could expand the dimensions of the data collection and validate the findings of this study in other cultural contexts.

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