

## The Effects of Transformational Leadership on Employee's Pro-social Rule Breaking

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### Abstract

The construct of pro-social rule breaking occupies an important, but largely neglected position within existing frameworks of organizational deviance. Pro-social rule breaking (PSRB) is a form of constructive deviance characterized by volitional rule breaking in the interest of the organization or its stakeholders. Using survey data collected from 252 employees in different organizations in China, the researchers empirically examine the relationship between transformational leadership and employee's pro-social rule breaking and the mediating role of job autonomy. Results indicate that transformational leadership is positively related to pro-social rule breaking, job autonomy fully mediates the relationships between transformational leadership and employee's pro-social rule breaking. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed. A set of future research directions are offered.

**Key words:** Pro-social rule breaking; Transformational leadership; Job autonomy

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### INTRODUCTION

Pro-social behavior has attracted considerable research attention over the last three decades (e.g., Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Grant, 2008; Organ, 1988; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Contrary to the traditional economic view of employees as self-interested performers, this literature has identified situations in which organization members engage in constructive, socially desirable behaviors that benefit coworkers or the organization as a whole with little or no benefit to the self. For example, employees can choose to help coworkers complete their tasks, pay more attention to customers than is required, put forth extra effort at task completion, or serve as a good representative of their organization to outsiders.

However, very few researchers have acknowledged the possibility that pro-socially motivated employees might choose to break organizational rules to perform these beneficial behaviors. For example, consider a hypothetical waiter faced with an upset customer. A common response to this situation might be to give the customer a free appetizer or dessert in an attempt to salvage the situation and keep the customer satisfied. Even if giving away free food violates an organizational rule, in this context the rule breaking is in the greater interest of the organization; the customer is now appeased and is likely to remain a repeat customer, and the benefits of this continued business far outweigh the cost of the free item. Although hypothetical, this scenario reflects the reality of many daily choices in organizations that require employees to either follow the rules or to deviate in the interest of effectively responding to perceived demands from customers, coworkers, or tasks themselves (e.g., Chung & Schneider, 2002; Schulz, 2003).

Morrison (2006) referred to this type of volitional rule breaking in the interest of the organization or its stakeholders as pro-social rule breaking (PSRB). More specifically, she identified three different categories of PSRB that are common in organizations, namely

PSRB to (1) more efficiently perform job duties for the organization, (2) help another employee with job-related duties, and (3) provide better customer service. PSRB fits within an emerging body of research that stresses the relevance of deviance that is committed with constructive intentions in mind. Traditionally, deviance researchers have focused on self-interested, destructive forms of deviance in organizations. In contrast, several authors have noted that the constructive, or positive, forms of deviance that employees commit with pro-social intentions have received far less research attention. Evidence suggests that PSRB is relatively common in organizations; in one study, Morrison (2006) found that approximately 64 per cent of participants could give an example of rule breaking that they had committed that would be categorized as PSRB. PSRB has the potential to improve the efficiency of employees, acquire and retain valued customers, and build social capital through enhanced helping directed toward coworkers.

Although pro-social rule breaking is a new construct that has not yet received much research attention, it fits within an emerging body of research that stresses the relevance of deviance that is committed with constructive intentions in mind. Recent studies indicate that the influence factors of pro-social rule breaking mainly focused on stakeholder behavior, job characteristics and individual characteristics. In the workplace, for employees, the leader behavior will become the symbol and representative of organization, and leadership behavior, therefore, should become the most direct clues which employee judge risk of prosocial rule breaking.

Transformational leaders bring deep change to their organizations by elevating their followers' interest, stirring them to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of others. Quinn (1996) recounts a study of the courage inherent in transformational leaders in public organizations. The study focused on examples of leaders in public organizations. The study focused on examples of leaders who took failing and even scandalous public agencies and turned them into extraordinary, even virtuous organizations. In every single case, the transformational leader had stepped outside of well-defined boundaries—regulations were ignored and directives were violated. In each case, the leaders found that in order to be extraordinary, they had to take significant risks and step outside of well-defined boundaries. They had to have the courage to continually create new possibilities for behavior that fell outside of current norms of appropriate behavior. Thus, having exposure to transformational leadership is likely to enable positive deviance in followers. Judge (2004) argued that transformational leadership is positively related to individual, team and organizational performance. Some China scholars confirmed that transformational leadership has a positive effect on prosocial behavior (Li, 2007; Chan, 2008). Transformational leadership encourages subordinates to

innovation, looking for new ways to solve the problem, which encouraged employees to produce innovative behavior. Galperin (2003) reported that innovation is the creation of new ideas and development, the essence of innovation behavior suggests that at least in part to deviate from the organization established rules. Therefore, if the supervisor showed transformational leadership behavior, it's easy to make the subordinate produces pro-social rule breaking behavior.

Smircich (1982) offered an explanation to the significant effects of transformational leadership on followers work behavior. It's a different mechanism for explaining the effects of transformational leaders—one rooted not in perceptions of leader or self, but rather, rooted in the job. One of the more powerful influences a leader can have on followers is in the "management of meaning", as leaders define and shape the "reality" in which followers work. Job characteristics theory offer one means of capturing key facets of that reality. As one of the core job characteristics, job autonomy has a positive effect on creativity and initiative in work. The degree of independence determines the deviation behavior of space. As the open style of leadership, transformational leadership through psychological empowerment increases employee perceived job autonomy, which in turn generate pro-social rule breaking.

Although these empirical findings have advanced our understanding of the links between transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking through job autonomy, unfortunately, little is known about the mediating role of job autonomy in the relationships between transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking. Given the salience of this issue, results of this study are expected to enrich the literature on transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking. Therefore, the objective of this study to examine the link between transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking; also, we propose that job autonomy is one of the important mediators that exist between transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

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### 1.1 Transformational Leadership and Pro-social Rule Breaking

Over the past two decades, transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most popular approaches to understanding leader effectiveness. Transformational leadership theory rests on the assertion that certain leader behaviors can arouse followers to a higher level of thinking (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). By appealing to followers' ideals and values, transformational leaders enhance commitment to a well-articulated vision and inspire followers to develop new ways of thinking about problems.

Transformational leadership theory has evolved to describe four dimensions of leader behavior. Idealized influence is the degree to which leaders behave in charismatic ways that cause followers to identify with them. Inspirational motivation is the degree to which leaders articulate visions that are appealing to followers. Intellectual stimulation is the degree to which leaders challenge assumptions, take risks, and solicit followers' ideas. Individualized consideration is the degree to which leaders attend to followers' needs, act as mentors or coaches, and listen to followers' concerns.

The social information processing model introduced by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978). These authors suggested that individuals rely on informational cues from their social contexts when making assessments about work environments. Leaders, for example, as central characteristics of a work context, are relevant information points when followers make judgments about their jobs. Leaders, for example, as central characteristics of a work context, are relevant information points when followers make judgments about their jobs.

According to the definition of pro-social rule breaking, we can see that it has two important features: First of all, pro-social violations of pro-social rule breaking behavior shows that this is a kind of extra-role behavior, it's one of the employees spontaneous show beyond the interests of the individual's behavior. Second, rule breaking reflected a break of the organization's rules, this is an act of adventure and innovation coexist.

As mentioned, transformational leaders provide constructive feedback to their followers, convince followers to exhibit extra effort, and encourage followers to think creatively about complex problems. As a result, followers tend to behave in ways that facilitate prosocial performance. In addition, an important feature of their transformational leader is good at creating a kind of encourage innovation organization environment and atmosphere, subordinates feel can explore and try to use innovative ways to perform a specific task, without fear of would be punished. Therefore, transformational leaders inspire the creative and innovative employees, subordinates believe they have the ability to put forward new ideas, this new idea is likely to deviate from the existing rules of the organization. Thus, we conjecture that:

Hypothesis 1: Transformational leadership is positively related to pro-social rule breaking.

### **1.2 Transformational Leadership and Job Autonomy**

Hackman and Oldham (1976) introduced job characteristics theory to explain conditions in which employees would be intrinsically motivated when performing a job. According to the theory, organizations can encourage positive work attitudes and increased work quality by enhancing jobs along five dimensions. Job

autonomy suggested the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom.

Although perceptions of core job characteristics are clearly dependent on structural aspects of one's formal job description, transformational leaders can foster such perceptions through their own actions. Leaders "frame" or "bracket" followers' work experiences to create a new point of reference for understanding the day-to-day flow of work (Smircich & Morgan, 1982).

In addition, many of the behaviors subsumed by the transformational pattern have direct implications for levels of core characteristics. Leaders who utilize intellectual stimulation by seeking new perspectives and developing new ways to perform job tasks may enhance follower perceptions of variety and autonomy. Leaders who engage in individualized consideration by coaching and teaching should have followers who see more autonomy and feedback in their jobs. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Transformational leadership is positively related job autonomy.

### **1.3 The Mediating Role of Job Autonomy**

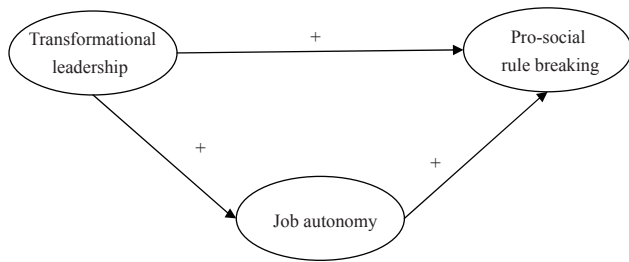
Morrison (2006) found that job autonomy is positively related pro-social rule breaking. One of the central predictions of job characteristics theory is that enhanced job autonomy are associated with higher levels of what Hackman and Oldham termed "internal motivation," described as a "self-perpetuating cycle of positive work motivation driven by self-generated rewards for good work". Research found that when employees experience job autonomy, they are more likely to show extra-role behavior. Parker (1993) studies have shown that employees have more autonomy in working procedure can increase the sense of control, this sense of control may make employees think they can deviate from the formal rules of the organization.

Piccolo (2006) suggested that in explaining the root of the influence of transformational leadership on employee behavior, the leader should be not only consideration, more should seek the characteristics of the job itself. Moreover, job autonomy is a tie that subordinates develop with their supervisor from social interactions both inside and outside working hours. Job autonomy will provide from subordinates work intrinsic motivation, enhanced the subordinates' self-efficacy, and strengthened the subordinates about consciousness of "control of complete the work method and procedures". It's enhance the possibility of pro-social rule breaking. Therefore, transformational leadership may not be able to have a direct impact on pro-social rule breaking. In order to do so, mediators like job autonomy are needed to extend the effects of transformational leadership to pro-social rule breaking.

Based on the hypotheses developed above, we argue that job autonomy is such a mediator that extends the effects of transformational leadership to favorable

pro-social rule breaking. Subordinates with the transformational leaders are more likely to have higher autonomy. Consequently, the subordinates have a positive view of their jobs. Satisfied employees are motivated to show their pro-social intention and creativity. Therefore, we posit that job autonomy is a missing link that bridges the relationship between transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 3: Job autonomy mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking.



**Figure 1**  
**Hypothesized Model of the Relationship Between Transformational Leadership, Job Autonomy and Pro-Social Rule Breaking**

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Respondents

Data were randomly collected from employees of different firms from food, bank, and communication industries, respectively, in Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong, Anhui and Jiangsu. After successful contacts with the human resources representatives of these three firms, we dispatched local research assistants to collect data on-site. During data collection, our research assistants explained clearly the research objectives, procedure of data collection, and guaranteed the anonymity of respondents. Out of 280 questionnaires, 252 usable questionnaires were returned, with a high response rate of 90%. Out of 252 respondents, over half of the respondents were female (55.2%), bachelor degree (52.0%), and are supportive workers (59.5%).

The mean age and organization tenure of these respondents were 28.2 and 2.2 years.

### 2.2 Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all measures used a response scale in which 1 was “strongly disagree” and 5 was “strongly agree.”

#### 2.2.1 Transformational Leadership

The four dimensions of transformational leadership were measured with items from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ Form 5X; Bass & Avolio, 1995). Twenty items were used to measure intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration. Transformational leadership

was measured at the individual level because the level of theory—dictated by the outcome variables was at the individual level (Rousseau, 1985). An example item is, “My supervisor seeks different perspectives when solving problems.” The Cronbach alpha of transformational leadership scale is 0.92.

#### 2.2.2 Job Autonomy

The nine items validated by Breugh (1985), based on the earlier work of Hackman J R, Oldham G R. (1976), were used. Sample items are, “I am allowed to decide how to go about getting my job done” and “I have control over the scheduling of my work.” The Cronbach alpha of job autonomy scale is 0.88.

#### 2.2.3 Pro-social Rule Breaking

The three dimensions of pro-social rule breaking were measured with items from the General Pro-social Rule Breaking Scale (GPSRBS, Dahling et.al., 2012). Five items were used to measure efficiency reasons (e.g., “I break organizational rules or policies to do my job more efficiently”), four items were used to measure coworker assistance reasons (e.g., “When another employee needs my help, I disobey organizational policies to help him/her”), and four items were used to measure customer service reasons (e.g., “I bend organizational rules so that I can best assist customers”). The Cronbach alpha of job autonomy scale is 0.92.

#### 2.2.4 Control Variables

Gender, age, educational level, organizational tenure, and job position are controlled to rule out the impacts on pro-social rule breaking. The questionnaire items were originally in English and then translated into Chinese by a researcher who was bilingual in Mandarin and English. We used a back-translation method to ensure that there is high accuracy of both English and Mandarin versions.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Before the testing of hypotheses, we checked the convergent validity of transformational leadership, job autonomy, and pro-social rule breaking, using AMOS 17.0. We started by confirming the factor structure of the hypothesized, Table 1 suggested three-factor model fit the data very well ( $\chi^2/df=1.414$ , REESA=0.041, CFI=0.942, TLI=0.936, IFI=0.943, GFI=0.861). We then tested an alternative model that include two-factor model, which showed considerably worse fit to the data ( $\chi^2/df=1.821$ , REESA=0.057, CFI=1.885, TLI=0.873, IFI=0.887, GFI=0.827). The results of this analysis indicate that the three-factor structure fits the data well in a confirmatory framework, indicating that the factor structure of the measure is stable.

Three-factor Model: transformational leadership, job autonomy, pro-social rule breaking

Two-factor Model: transformational leadership+job autonomy, pro-social rule breaking  
 Single-factor Model: transformational leadership+job autonomy+pro-social rule breaking

**Table 1**  
**The Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

Model	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI	GFI
Three-factor Model	1.414	0.041	0.942	0.936	0.943	0.861
Two-factor Model	1.821	0.057	1.885	0.873	0.887	0.827
Single-factor Model	2.582	0.079	0.773	0.755	0.775	0.729

**Table 2**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1-Gender	1.55	.49								
2-Age	2.02	1.07	-1.19**							
3-Organizational tenure	2.22	1.16	-.15*	.80**						
4-Educational level	2.71	.77	-.07	.18**	.10					
5-Job position	1.55	.74	-.09	.39**	.46**	.21**				
6-Transformational leadership	3.55	.61	-.07	-.06	-.09	.09	.18**	(0.92)		
7-Job autonomy	3.48	.69	-.03	-.11	-.10	-.11	.14**	.57**	(0.88)	
8-Pro-social rule breaking	2.74	.73	-.12	.03	.02	.11	.20**	.30**	.39**	(0.92)

N = 252, \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01 (two tails)

**3.3 Test of Mediating Effect**

The mediation effects were tested based on the three conditions suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) (1) independent variable should be related to mediator, (2) mediator should be relate to the dependable variable, and (3) full mediation exists when independent variable no longer related to the dependent variable after mediator has been included.

Table 3 presents the multiple regression results from testing the mediating hypotheses for the sample.

**3.2 Descriptive Analyses**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables are reported in Table 2. Generally, means ranged from 1.55 to 3.48 with low standard deviations, with exceptions on age and organizational tenure. Specifically, job autonomy (r = 0.39, p < 0.01) was positively correlated with pro-social rule breaking.

Moreover, transformational leadership was each positively related to pro-social rule breaking (r = 0.30, p < 0.01), and job autonomy (r = 0.57, p < 0.01). Hence, hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 were preliminary supported. We then used subsequent hierarchical regression analysis to further test the hypotheses.

In step 1, the controlled variables including gender, age, organizational tenure, educational level, and job position were entered. In step 2, transformational leadership was entered, results indicated that transformational leadership ( $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$ ) was positively related to pro-social rule breaking. Hence, hypothesis 1 was supported. In step 3, job autonomy was entered, results indicated that transformational leadership was positively related to job autonomy. ( $\beta = 0.63, p < 0.001$ ). Hence, hypothesis 2 was supported.

**Table 3**  
**Multiple Regressions on Transformational Leadership, Job Autonomy, and Pro-social Rule Breaking**

Variables	Pro-social rule breaking					Job autonomy	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5		
Step 1							
Control variable	Gender	-0.17	-0.20	0.18	-0.15	-0.16	-0.04
	Age	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	-0.04
	Organizational tenure	-0.06	-0.02	0.01	-0.04	-0.04	-0.02
	Educational level	0.06	0.05	0.10	0.05	-0.01	-0.15**
	Job position	0.22**	0.15*	0.11	0.13	0.10	0.10
Step 2							
Independent variable	Transformational leadership		0.32***	0.09	0.31***	0.25**	0.63***
Step 3							
Mediating variable	Job autonomy			0.37***			
R <sup>2</sup>		0.06	0.13	0.21	0.17	0.23	0.37
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.06**	0.07***	0.08***	0.04***	0.06***	0.29***
F-statistics		3.31**	6.11***	9.11***	7.29***	8.79***	23.49***

N = 252, \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001.

In step 3, results indicated that job autonomy was positively related to pro-social rule breaking ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). After fulfilling the first two conditions as stipulated in hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2, results of Table 3 showed that the inclusion of job autonomy fully crowded out the significant positive relationship between transformational leadership and pro-social rule breaking (from  $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.10$  to  $\beta = 0.09$ , n.s.). Clearly, job autonomy fully mediated the effects of transformational leadership on pro-social rule breaking. Hence, hypotheses 3 were supported.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### 4.1 Discussion

In this study, we introduced and tested a model that used for explaining the relationship between transformational leadership and employees pro-social rule breaking behaviors. Results suggested that followers of leaders who engaged in inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration behaviors perceived higher levels of pro-social rule breaking behaviors. Moreover, we set out to investigate the mediating role of job autonomy in the relationships between transformational leadership and employees pro-social rule breaking behaviors. The findings support our proposal that job autonomy acts as a fully mediating channel to extend the effects of individual-level transformational leadership onto pro-social rule breaking.

### 4.2 Implications for Research and Practice

The results of our study have several managerial implications. Our study is one of the first to extend the literature on pro-social rule breaking by demonstrating the important mediating role of job autonomy in supervisor-subordinate relationship. The results indicate that transformational leaders breed employees' job autonomy, and thereby they are delighted to participate in pro-social rule breaking behaviors. Given the salient role of job autonomy, managers are advised to pay strong attention to the development of employees' job autonomy. Traditionally, the job design literature has looked to potentially expensive and time-consuming initiatives like job enlargement or enrichment to boost core characteristic levels. Our results suggest that leaders could influence perceived core characteristic levels by changing the language, imagery, and symbols used to communicate meaning on the job.

Pro-social rule breaking exist objectively in the organization, management should with a new perspective to look at the behavior of the employee performance in the workplace, managers should focus on the advantages of people at work, and not just managing their deficiency. Of course, such efforts would require specific initiatives

geared toward increasing leaders' use of transformational language and imagery. Transformational behaviors could be incorporated into the training courses that new leaders are often required to complete. Kark (2003) recently demonstrated that transformational leadership training could improve follower outcomes and that transformational training yielded better results than did eclectic leadership training. Transformational leadership can enhance the awareness of subordinates for autonomy, as long as employees are satisfied with their current autonomy, this could effectively translate the effects of transformational leadership into favorable pro-social rule breaking.

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study has a number of limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, many of the measures we collected were self-reported, and this approach may artificially inflate some of the relationships we found. Despite the fact that the tests indicated the distinctiveness of the focal variables, it is possible that the employees' self-reported constructs may result in common source bias. Future research can explore this relationship in greater detail by collecting reports of pro-social rule breaking from groups or teams of employees and aggregating the data to examine how group-level pro-social rule breaking influences individual pro-social rule breaking.

Second, it is the inherent problem of cross-sectional data. Longitudinal study may address how the relationships of transformational leadership lead to pro-social rule breaking and to favorable employees' responses over time. Additionally, we propose that a longitudinal study may further measure that the extent of transformational leadership be positively related to the pro-social rule breaking.

Third, future research may put more efforts in exploring other plausible mediators. Individual characteristics of followers may also have an important role on the transformational leadership process (Dvir & Shamir, 2003) in such a way that some traits (e.g., risk-taking propensity) facilitate pro-social rule breaking. Alternatively, the relationships between transformational leadership and employees pro-social rule breaking may also be moderated by employees' individual characteristics.

In future research, a macro-dyadic perspective on pro-social rule breaking can be explored and the construct validity of pro-social rule breaking can be tested in other contexts, such as Europe and Africa. And further studies can be conducted on whether pro-social rule breaking is dynamic in different contexts.

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