

# When and why empowering leadership increases followers' taking charge: A multilevel examination in China

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Published online: 31 July 2015

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**Abstract** Drawing from the cultural self-representation model, we propose a multilevel model to examine when and why empowering leadership elicits followers' taking charge behaviors in China. Data from 310 full-time employees in 81 work groups provide support for the mediating role of role breadth self-efficacy in transforming team-directed empowering leadership into individual taking charge behaviors. In addition, this mediation relationship is found to be attenuated by high differentiated empowering leadership and low individual power distance orientation. Finally, we find support for a three-way moderated mediation—which the moderating effect of differentiated empowering leadership is found to be significant only among followers who have low power distance orientation. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

**Keywords** Empowering leadership · Taking charge · Differentiated leadership · Role breadth self-efficacy · Power distance orientation

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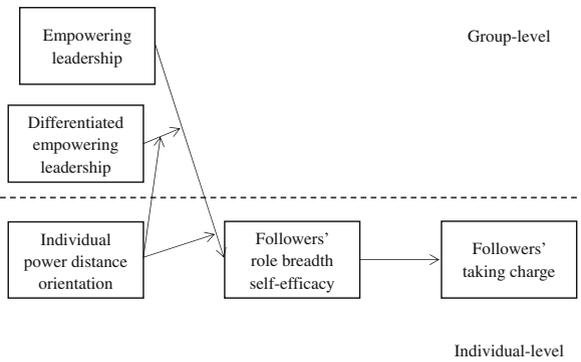
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With the rapid transition from a production economy to a knowledge economy in today's business world, organizations are increasingly relying on employees to engage in proactive behavior to challenge the status quo, promote innovation, and initiate strategic change (Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Among various forms of proactive behavior, taking charge has been the most studied (e.g., Burnett, Chiaburu, Shapiro, & Li, 2013; Li, Chiaburu, Kirkman, & Xie, 2013; McAllister, Kamdar, Morrison, & Turban, 2007). Taking charge refers to "employees' voluntary and constructive efforts to effect organizationally functional change with respect to how work is executed within the contexts of their jobs, work units, or organizations" (Morrison & Phelps, 1999: 403). Although taking charge is certainly desirable, many Asian cultures (e.g., China) also emphasize the importance of *renqing*, face, and harmony, which may discourage employees from taking charge in these contexts (Leung, Chen, Zhou, & Lim, 2014). Therefore, not only is it theoretically important to examine the psychological impetus for employees' proactive behavior of taking charge in Asia, but it is also practically useful to explore what managers can do to solicit such behaviors among Asian cultures.

Although recent research has shown that one key leadership behavior that can promote taking charge is empowering leadership (Li, Chiaburu, & Kirkman, 2014), broadly defined as sharing power with followers by enhancing motivation and cultivating self-efficacy, much less is known about the contextual and cultural contingencies influencing *why* and *when* empowering leadership is more effective in eliciting followers' taking charge behaviors. This is problematic because examining mediation is a critical component of theory building that helps scholars identify *why* a process occurs (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). Drawing on the cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993), the current study seeks to examine the mediating relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge via role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) in China, with a focus on the contextual contingency of differentiated empowering leadership (i.e., variation in a leader's empowering behaviors toward all his/her followers) and the cultural contingency of individual power distance orientation.

Specifically, we argue that leaders' team-directed empowerment practices can enhance followers' self-concept of RBSE and in turn lead to increased taking charge behavior. Further, we argue that this mediation link is affected by the congruence between empowering leadership and the core values in a culture (i.e., collectivism) or specific cultural values (i.e., power distance orientation) held by local people. Because Chinese people are characterized as emphasizing traditional Confucian values, such as submission to authority, identification with collectivism, and obedience to power distance (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997; Hofstede, 1991), we suggest that highly differentiated empowering leadership violates the value of egalitarianism (Yang, 2003), and thus may impede the link between empowering leadership and RBSE, with downstream implications for taking charge. In addition, we theorize that both the direct effect of empowering leadership and its interactive effect with differentiated empowering leadership will be moderated by the individual cultural value of power distance orientation. The overall research model is depicted in Fig. 1.

We seek to make three key theoretical contributions in this research. First, we contribute to a burgeoning stream of research examining the relationships between empowering leadership and followers' proactive behaviors (e.g., Chen, Sharma, Edinger, Shapiro, & Farh, 2011; Li et al., 2014; Martin, Liao, & Campbell, 2013;



**Fig. 1** Overall research model

Zhang & Bartol, 2010; Zhang & Zhou, 2014) by identifying RBSE as an underlying mechanism that explains *why* empowering leadership promotes followers' taking charge behaviors. Unraveling mediation mechanisms is thought to be particularly valuable in the area of leadership research, where competing theories of leadership and influence abound but scholarly research on why particular leadership styles influence followers' behavior is limited (Eberly, Johnson, Hernandez, & Avolio, 2013).

Second, we extend empowering leadership research by highlighting differentiated empowering leadership as an important but under-examined group-level contextual construct with direct relevance for how employees react to leader empowerment at work. Our examination of differentiated empowering leadership provides a novel perspective for future team-directed empowering leadership research (e.g., Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen, 2007; Li et al., 2014). Third, leadership scholars have called for a cultural contingency perspective in examining Western leadership theories in other cultural contexts (Dorfman & House, 2004; Huang, Shi, Zhang, & Cheung, 2006; Lam, Huang, & Lau, 2012). We contribute to this area of research by following the recommendation of Liden (2012) to identify cultural moderators of the effects of a universally endorsed leadership construct, namely empowering leadership. Specifically, we demonstrate *when* (i.e., low differentiated empowering leadership) and *among whom* (i.e., followers with a high power distance orientation) leaders' team-directed empowering behaviors are most influential in developing RBSE and promoting taking charge behaviors in Chinese employees. Practically, we offer new insight into the precise types of followers and team context that are best equipped to leverage the positive effects of empowering leadership in the pursuit of increased follower taking charge.

## Theory and hypotheses

The cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993) is a culture-based theory of work motivation. The model relies on the cognitive mechanisms of work motivation and was developed primarily on the basis of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), with a particular emphasis on individuals' self-regulatory processes. Self-regulatory processes operate in service of the self, and individuals often rely on their self-

regulatory processes to develop and maintain a positive representation of the self (Bandura, 1986; Erez & Earley, 1993). The central tenet of the cultural self-representation model is that the motivational effects of various managerial techniques and practices on employee behaviors are evaluated by the self in terms of the fulfillment of one's needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency. Importantly, such evaluations are determined by the cultural norms and standards of individuals (Erez, 1997). In a nutshell, the cultural self-representation model depicts a multilevel process whereby managerial practices interact with cultural norms (e.g., collectivism and power distance) to influence individuals' self-concept constructs (e.g., self-efficacy), which in turn affect individuals' behaviors.

Drawing on the cultural self-representation model, we theorize a cross-level mediation relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge behaviors via their enhanced role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE). According to Parker (1998), RBSE is a type of self-efficacy that specifically "concerns the extent to which people feel confident that they are able to carry out a broader and more proactive role, beyond traditional prescribed technical requirements" (835). We focus on RBSE because of our specific interest in followers' proactive behavior of taking charge, which is conceptually close to RBSE (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006).

### **Empowering leadership and followers' role breadth self-efficacy**

Empowering leadership is defined as "the process of implementing conditions that enable sharing power with an employee by delineating the significance of the employee's job, providing greater decision-making autonomy, expressing confidence in the employee's capabilities, and removing hindrances to performance" (Zhang & Bartol, 2010: 109). Empowering leadership often consists of a set of managerial practices, such as delegation, participative decision-making, persuasive and encouraging communication, performance development and mentoring (Ahearn, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Zhang & Zhou, 2014). According to the cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993), we suggest that empowering leaders will enhance followers' RBSE through these managerial practices (Bandura, 1982).

Specifically, to the extent that empowering leaders delegate power and express confidence in high performance, followers may feel obliged for and capable of expanding their in-role work behavior and proactively sharing leadership responsibilities, such as planning and organizing, problem-solving, and decision-making (Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006; Martin et al., 2013). Research has shown that the more tasks followers believe they are entitled to do, the more confident they are in taking broader roles at work (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). In addition, with the delegated power and other resources (e.g., providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraints) gained from empowering leaders, followers are likely to experience more flexibility in their work. Previous research has demonstrated that perceptions of work flexibility will, in turn, increase individual RBSE (Parker, 1998). More directly, empirical research on empowering leadership has shown that empowering leaders not only enhance followers' individual job self-efficacy (Ahearn et al., 2005) but also encourage group members to engage in role exchanges and collective exploration whereby they learn about the broader work environment, master wider areas of expertise, and gain higher

collective efficacy (Lorinkova, Pearsall, & Sims, 2013). Taken together, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1** Empowering leadership is positively related to followers' RBSE.

### **Empowering leadership and followers' taking charge behaviors via RBSE**

According to Morrison and Phelps (1999), taking charge is a follower's discretionary behavior that usually challenges the status quo and brings constructive changes to an organization. Unlike affiliative and maintenance-oriented extra-role behaviors, such as interpersonal helping, sportsmanship, and other forms of organizational citizenship behaviors (Organ, 1988), taking charge is characterized as proactive, challenging, change-oriented, and risky (McAllister et al., 2007). Hence, whether or not to engage in taking charge depends on followers' perceptions of the extent to which they can carry out this behavior successfully in a safe environment (Parker et al., 2010), and this belief is largely dependent on managerial practices and the form of leadership in an organization (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Li et al., 2013; Parker et al., 2010).

Past research has shown that empowering leadership is associated with increased followers' extra-role behaviors, including both affiliative citizenship behaviors (Huang, Iun, Liu, & Gong, 2010; Raub & Robert, 2010) and challenging proactive behaviors (Chen et al., 2011; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). In particular, Li et al. (2014) found a direct, positive relationship between team-directed empowering leadership and followers' individual taking charge behavior. According to the cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993), the positive relationship between empowering leadership and follower taking charge can be explained by the individual self-concept of RBSE.

On the one hand, we have theorized how empowering leadership enhances followers' perceptions of RBSE. On the other hand, we postulate that increased RBSE will give rise to individual taking charge for two main reasons. First, engaging in taking charge behavior aimed at changing the status quo is considered as potentially risky to individuals (Parker et al., 2006). RBSE should strengthen individuals' courage to take risks at work by raising feelings of control and the perceived likelihood of success in more broad areas at work (Morrison & Phelps, 1999). Second, trying to effect organizationally functional change with respect to how work is executed is also extremely difficult (Morrison & Phelps, 1999) as employees are generally averse to these changes (Reger, Gustafson, Demarie, & Mullane, 1994). Increased RBSE should equip individuals with more confidence in taking part in these organizationally functional changes (Krueger & Dickson, 1994). Empirically, RBSE has been demonstrated as a proximal psychological impetus for a variety of individual proactive behaviors, including proactive job performance (Griffin et al., 2007; Ohly & Fritz, 2007), proactive problem solving (Parker et al., 2006), and taking charge (Parker & Collins, 2010). Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

**Hypothesis 2** Followers' RBSE is positively related to followers' taking charge.

**Hypothesis 3** Followers' RBSE mediates the positive relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge.

## Differentiated empowering leadership as a contextual constraint in China

The concept of differentiated leadership was developed by Wu, Tsui, and Kinicki (2010) to delineate “the case in which a leader exhibits varying levels of individual-focused leadership behavior to different group members” (90). Although extant research on differentiated leadership has often focused on leader-member exchange (LMX) differentiation (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Liden, Erdogan, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2006; Ma & Qu, 2010), recent studies have begun to examine other types of differentiated leadership styles, such as differentiated transformational leadership (Cole, Bedeian, & Bruch, 2011; Wu et al., 2010) and differentiated laissez-faire leadership (Cole & Bedeian, 2007). In this study, we follow these prior investigations of differentiated leadership and define differentiated empowering leadership as the extent to which a leader exhibits varying levels of empowering behavior towards different followers.

The concept of differentiated empowering leadership has strong theoretical roots. Role theory (Graen, 1976) posits that leaders tend to delegate power and different tasks and resources to followers who differ in their ability to make contributions to the group. Moreover, LMX theory (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997) also suggests that leaders treat their followers differently by trusting in some followers more than others. As a result, followers who have higher levels of ability and mutual trust with a leader are more likely to be empowered (Hakimi, Knippenberg, & Steffen, 2010), leading to the development of differentiated empowerment in a group. In short, differentiated empowering leadership delineates a form of team-directed empowering leadership behavior, which is likely to result from a leader’s differential exchange relationships with followers.

The cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993) posits that the development of self-concept constructs (i.e., RBSE) associated with managerial practices (i.e., empowering leadership) depends on cultural values. Newman and Nollen (1996) suggested that the greater the congruence between the motivational practices and individual cultural values, the more influential those motivational practices are. Drawing from these ideas, we propose that, by violating the norms of collectivism, which is considered as a core value in Chinese culture (Chen et al., 2011; Hofstede, 1991; Kirkman & Shapiro, 2001), differentiated empowering leadership will impede the development of RBSE associated with empowering leadership and thus weaken the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge via RBSE. We explicate reasons for this moderated mediation effect based on two major expressions of collectivism.

First, because collectivistic cultures emphasize the connectedness of human beings to each other and collectivists are more likely to describe, evaluate, and represent themselves in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), it is suggested in the cultural self-representation model that group-centered managerial practices should have stronger effects on individual self-concept (i.e., RBSE) than individual-centered practices (Erez & Earley, 1993). Thus, we argue that the positive effect of empowering leadership on followers’ RBSE will be stronger when the empowerment is group-centered (i.e., low differentiated empowering leadership) than when it is individual-centered (i.e., high differentiated empowering leadership). Second, collectivists also emphasize harmony and equality (Chen, Meindl, & Hui, 1998; Hui, Triandis, & Yee,

1991), as manifested by the classical Confucian aphorism that there should be “no worry about scarcity but unevenness; no worry about poverty but instability” (Chen, 1995: 413). Because differentiated empowering leaders develop idiosyncratic relationships with their followers and empower differentially among their followers, high differentiated empowering leadership may violate the egalitarian rule of resource allocation and thus be incongruent with the cultural values of Chinese people, weakening the positive effect of empowering leadership on followers’ RBSE.

To sum up, we draw on the cultural self-representation model and hypothesize that the motivational process of empowering leadership affecting followers’ RBSE, and hence their taking charge behavior will be diminished by high differentiated empowering leadership as it is incongruent with the Chinese value of collectivism (cf. Erez & Earley, 1993). In support of this argument, Liao, Liu, and Loi (2010) recently found that high LMX differentiation impedes the relationship between LMX quality and creativity among Chinese employees, presumably by violating the norms of egalitarianism and fairness valued by most Chinese employees. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4** Differentiated empowering leadership moderates the mediating relationship between empowering leadership and followers’ taking charge via RBSE such that the mediating relationship will be weaker when differentiated empowering leadership is high than when it is low.

### The moderating role of individual power distance orientation

Erez and Earley (1993) theorized in their model that power distance is another key cultural value that plays an important role in determining the implications of managerial practices for RBSE. Organizational behavior scholars have conceptualized power distance orientation as an individual value, referring to the extent to which one accepts power and authority differentials as legitimate in an organization (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007; Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009). In this research, we suggest that the development of individual RBSE under the context of empowering leadership will be strengthened by a high power distance orientation, which will further strengthen the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge via RBSE.

As we mentioned, the positive relationship between empowering leadership and followers’ RBSE is established by the social cognitive forces (e.g., social persuasion) associated with a leader’s empowering behaviors (Bandura, 1977, 1982). One central argument regarding the cognitive process of learning is that the perceived status of a model will influence the extent to which people are motivated to mimic a role model’s behavior (Bandura, 1973). In other words, the more respect followers have for a leader, the more inclined they are to learn and adopt the leader’s behaviors (Yang, Zhang, & Tsui, 2010). The defining characteristics of power distance orientation are described as respect for and submission to authority (Kirkman et al., 2009; Loi, Lam, & Chan, 2012). For instance, Earley (1999) observed that, within a group consisting of high power distance orientation individuals, a high-status group member’s perception of group efficacy was more strongly related to the overall group’s rating of group efficacy, suggesting that high power distance orientation individuals are more inclined to rely on

and mimic the opinion of high-status individuals (i.e., leaders). Thus, we suggest that, compared with low power distance orientation individuals, followers with high power distance orientation tend to have higher levels of motivation to learn from their leaders, and their self-regulatory processes (e.g., development of RBSE) are more likely to be affected by the leaders' empowering behaviors (Erez, 1997).

By strengthening the development of individual RBSE associated with empowering leadership, high power distance orientation will further facilitate the mediation relationship between empowering leadership and followers taking charge via RBSE. This moderated mediation argument is consistent with Erez and Earley's (1993) theory, which suggests that participative management, a prototypical form of empowering leadership, has stronger motivational effects on individual behaviors in some Asian countries (e.g., Japan) where the value of high power distance takes the form of "management familism," namely the relationship between the superior and the subordinate in the workplace is parallel to that between father and son (Erez, 1997). China is such a country because one of the most significant traditional Chinese values is submission to authority, which characterizes the leader-follower relationship at work and the father-son relationship at home (Farh et al., 1997, 2007). With these traditional norms in mind, high power distance orientation followers respect, trust, and model their leaders more than do low power distance orientation followers, and they are more likely to derive RBSE from an empowering leader's persuasion and encouragement, which in turn will motivate them to take charge at work. According to the above arguments, we hypothesize as follows:

**Hypothesis 5** Individual power distance orientation moderates the mediating relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge via RBSE such that the mediating relationship will be more significant among followers with a high power distance orientation than among those with a low power distance orientation.

In addition to influencing how followers react to empowering leadership, individual power distance orientation may also affect how they react to differentiated empowering leadership, thereby affecting the interactive effects on followers' RBSE and, in turn, their taking charge behaviors. Specifically, because high power distance orientation individuals have strong respect for authority, they are less likely to challenge their leaders' behaviors, question their integrity, or consider their differentiated empowerment as a violation of justice (Farh et al., 1997, 2007; Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004). Therefore, for people with a high power distance orientation, their perceptions of RBSE will be enhanced by the leaders' empowering behaviors, independent of the degree to which the power of authority is differentially delegated among group members. Consequently, empowering leadership will give rise to their taking charge behaviors due to enhanced RBSE when differentiated empowering leadership is both high and low.

Conversely, low power distance orientation individuals have relatively low compliance with authority, and they may experience feelings of injustice when their leaders delegate power and resources only to a certain group of followers (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Kim & Leung, 2007; Lam, Schaubroeck, & Aryee, 2002). In other words, highly differentiated empowering leadership is more likely to be in contradiction to their value of egalitarianism (Erez, 1997). We thus suggest that, among people

with low power distance orientation, the indirect and positive relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge via RBSE exists only when differentiated empowering leadership is low rather than high. Taken together, we propose the following three-way interaction:

**Hypothesis 6** Individual power distance orientation weakens the moderating effect of differentiated empowering leadership on the mediating relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge via RBSE such that the moderated mediation effect will be significant only among followers with a low power distance orientation.

## Methods

### Procedures and sample

We collected data in nine Chinese firms across a wide range of industries, including telecommunications, manufacturing, construction, and security. This helped to avoid the contextual constraints associated with the use of limited industries (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). In each firm, we followed the procedures described below to implement the survey. First, with the permission of one executive manager, we asked the HR manager to select 10 or more work groups randomly and schedule a time for us to deliver the surveys. The chosen groups were all official departments or long-term work teams in the organization, so there was only one official leader in each group and the members had very close and frequent contact with each other at work. Then, on the day of data collection, all the group members were asked to participate voluntarily and were compensated with 20 Chinese *yuan* (approximately US\$3.20). All the followers gathered in a large meeting room to complete surveys assessing RBSE, empowering leadership, and power distance orientation, and collecting demographic information. We ensured confidentiality throughout the data collection. All the group leaders gathered to report on their tenure in their current position and evaluate the taking charge behaviors of their followers who participated in the survey. Finally, the HR manager helped us to match the followers' surveys with their respective leaders.

In total, we surveyed 392 followers in 98 work groups. To ensure the validity of our evaluation of team-directed empowering leadership, we excluded 11 groups (43 followers) for which the response rates were less than 60 % (Roth & BeVier, 1998; Timmerman, 2005). In addition, because five leaders were unavailable during the day of data collection, we dropped these five groups (34 followers). We excluded five additional followers because of an error in data matching. As a result, the final sample consisted of 310 followers from 81 work groups, with an average group response rate of 67.93 %. The 310 followers in the final sample were an average of 31.24 years old, 45.5 % female, and reported an average of 8.93 years ( $SD = 7.52$ ) of tenure in their firm. Most of them were well educated (74.2 % had a bachelor's degree or higher). Of the 81 group leaders, the average tenure in the current position was 3.52 years ( $SD = 3.30$ ). The average span of control for leaders was 5.68 followers, ranging from three to eight ( $SD = .72$ ). Among the 81 groups, 20 (24.69 %) were in production and operation departments, 18 (22.22 %) were project management teams, 15 (18.52 %) were in

administrative management departments, 13 (16.05 %) were in marketing departments, 8 (9.88 %) were in finance departments, and the remaining 7 (8.64 %) were in human resource management departments. Our sample was diverse in terms of the nature of work, responding to researchers' call for the study of proactive behavior in ordinary functioning departments in organizations to enable the generalization of research findings (Morrison & Phelps, 1999).

## Measures

Because the scales we used were originally developed in English, we followed Brislin's (1980) back-translation procedure to develop our Chinese measures.

### *Empowering leadership*

Empowering leadership was measured with a 12-item scale developed by Ahearne et al. (2005). This 12-item scale has also been used in prior studies conducted in the Chinese context (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010). A sample item for this scale is "My manager expresses confidence in my ability to perform at a high level" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .96 in our study. Empowering leadership was calculated by averaging the group members' perceptions. Interrater and intraclass measures (median  $r_{wg}$  = .96, ICC[1] = .60, ICC[2] = .85) justified aggregation across members (Bliese, 2000).

### *Role breadth self-efficacy*

RBSE was measured using Parker et al.'s (2006) 7-item scale. Followers were asked to evaluate how confident they felt in engaging in proactive, interpersonal, and integrative activities. A sample item is "I am confident in analyzing a long-term problem to find a solution" (1 = not at all confident, 5 = very confident). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .93 in this study.

### *Taking charge*

Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Li et al., 2013), we used the 10-item scale developed by Morrison and Phelps (1999) to assess followers' taking charge behaviors as reported by their leaders. A sample item is "This person often tries to change how his or her job is executed in order to be more effective" (1 = absolutely not compliant with the descriptive behavior, 5 = in full compliance with the descriptive behavior). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .93.

### *Differentiated empowering leadership*

Drawing from Erdogan and Bauer's (2010) operationalization of LMX differentiation (see Henderson, Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2008; Liden et al., 2006), we assessed differentiated empowering leadership by calculating the within-group variance in followers' perceptions of empowering leadership.

### *Individual power distance orientation*

Individual power distance orientation was measured with the 6-item measure developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988). A sample item is “Managers should make most decisions without consulting subordinates” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .82 in our study.

### *Control variables*

At the individual level, we controlled for demographic variables, including gender, age, job tenure (measured in years), and education level, which have been found to be related to individual RBSE (Parker et al., 2006) and taking charge (Burnett et al., 2013; Morrison & Phelps, 1999). Finally, we included group size (measured as the number of group members in each group) and leader tenure in the current position as the group-level control.

### **Analytical strategy**

Given our multilevel research model and nested data, we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & du Toit, 2004) in the HLM 6.08 software to test our hypotheses. A chi-square test suggested that the between-group variance in individual RBSE ( $\chi^2 [80] = 272.18, p < .001; ICC[1] = .39$ ) and taking charge ( $\chi^2 [80] = 328.96, p < .001; ICC[1] = .44$ ) was significant, thereby justifying the use of HLM to test our hypotheses. All the individual-level variables, except gender, which is a dummy variable, were grand-mean centered before being added to the regression to reduce the collinearity between the group-level intercept and the slope terms (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998).

## **Results**

### **Preliminary analysis**

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a set of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using AMOS 20.0 to determine whether our focal variables were distinct from each other. Following prior studies on empowering leadership (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010), we categorized the 12 items empowering leadership scale into four indices representing four distinct sub-dimensions (i.e., enhancing the meaningfulness of work, fostering participation in decision making, expressing confidence in high performance, providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraints) before running the CFAs. The results suggested that the proposed four-factor model (i.e., empowering leadership, RBSE, taking charge, and individual power distance orientation) displayed an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 907.53, df = 318, IFI = .90, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .08$ ). The fit statistics for the hypothesized model were significantly better than an alternative three-factor model (i.e., loading both RBSE and taking charge into one single factor:  $\chi^2 = 2246.10, df = 321, IFI = .66, CFI = .66, RMSEA = .14; \Delta\chi^2 = 1338.57, \Delta df = 3, p < .001$ ) and a baseline one-factor model (i.e., when all items are loaded into the same factor:  $\chi^2 =$

3490.82,  $df = 324$ ,  $IFI = .44$ ,  $CFI = .43$ ,  $RMSEA = .18$ ;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 2583.29$ ,  $\Delta df = 6$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, the CFAs results indicated good discriminant validity in our measures. The descriptive statistics and correlations of all variables are presented in Table 1.

**The mediating effect of RBSE (H1–H3)**

Hypothesis 1 proposed that empowering leadership should be positively related to followers’ RBSE. The result shown in Model 2 of Table 2 supports this prediction ( $\gamma = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). And Hypothesis 2 proposed that followers’ RBSE should be positively related to followers’ taking charge. The result shown in Model 3 of Table 3 supports this prediction ( $\gamma = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Hypothesis 3 proposed a mediating role of RBSE in the positive relationship between empowering leadership and followers’ taking charge. We followed Baron and Kenny’s (1986) procedure to examine this mediational relationship. First, as shown above, empowering leadership is significantly and positively related to followers’ RBSE (Hypothesis 1). Second, there is a significant and positive relationship between empowering leadership and followers’ taking charge as shown in Model 2 of Table 3 ( $\gamma = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Third, when both empowering leadership and followers’ RBSE are entered into the regression model simultaneously (see Model 3 of Table 3), the mediator of RBSE remains a significant predictor of followers’ taking charge behaviors (as shown in Hypothesis 2). However, compared to the result shown in Model 2 of

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations

| Variable                                 | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1      | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     | 7     |
|--|----------|-----------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Individual level variables               |          |           |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 1. Gender                                | .55      | .50       | –      |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 2. Age                                   | 31.24    | 7.33      | .16**  | –     |       |       |       |       |       |
| 3. Education level                       | 1.74     | .62       | -.18** | -.09  | –     |       |       |       |       |
| 4. Tenure                                | 8.93     | 7.52      | .11    | .87** | -.14* | –     |       |       |       |
| 5. RBSE                                  | 3.61     | .74       | -.00   | .09   | .25** | .03   | (.93) |       |       |
| 6. Individual power distance orientation | 3.71     | 1.25      | .06    | .24** | -.04  | .20** | .06   | (.82) |       |
| 7. Followers’ taking charge              | 3.46     | .77       | -.09   | -.04  | .12*  | -.06  | .33** | -.04  | (.93) |
| Group level variables                    |          |           |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 1. Group size                            | 5.68     | .72       | –      |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 2. Leader tenure in current position     | 3.52     | 3.30      | .09    | –     |       |       |       |       |       |
| 3. Empowering leadership                 | 4.96     | 1.04      | .02    | .12   | (.96) |       |       |       |       |
| 4. Differentiated empowering leadership  | .61      | .73       | -.01   | -.14  | -.28* | –     |       |       |       |

*N* = 310 at the individual level; *N* = 81 at the group level; Reliabilities are in parentheses on the diagonal

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ , two-tailed

**Table 2** HLM results for followers' RBSE

| Variables  | Followers' RBSE |                      |                      |                      |
|--|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|  | Model 1         | Model 2 <sup>a</sup> | Model 3 <sup>a</sup> | Model 4 <sup>a</sup> |
| Intercept  | 3.60***         | 3.61***              | 3.59***              | 3.58***              |
| Level 1 variables  |                 |                      |                      |                      |
| Gender   | .08             | .17*                 | .17*                 | .16*                 |
| Age  | .15             | .21*                 | .21*                 | .23**                |
| Education level  | .17***          | .11***               | .11***               | .11***               |
| Tenure   | -.06            | -.11                 | -.12                 | -.13                 |
| Individual power distance orientation  | .15*            | .14*                 | .10                  | .11                  |
| Level 2 variables  |                 |                      |                      |                      |
| Group size   | .07             | .05                  | .05                  | .05                  |
| Leader tenure in current position  | -.02            | -.05                 | -.03                 | -.03                 |
| Differentiated empowering leadership   | -.09            | -.01                 | -.01                 | -.03                 |
| Empowering leadership  |                 | .39***               | .39***               | .19***               |
| Interaction variables  |                 |                      |                      |                      |
| Empowering leadership × Differentiated empowering leadership   |                 |                      | -.07*                | -.09*                |
| Empowering leadership × Individual power distance orientation  |                 |                      | .10*                 | .14**                |
| Differentiated empowering leadership × Individual power distance orientation                         |                 |                      |                      | .20*                 |
| Empowering leadership × Differentiated empowering leadership × Individual power distance orientation |                 |                      |                      | .12*                 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ <sup>b</sup>  | .15             | .28                  | .15                  | .02                  |

$N = 310$  at the individual level;  $N = 81$  at the group level. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , two-tailed test

<sup>a</sup> Regression Model 2 is used for testing Hypothesis 1; Regression Model 3 is used for testing Hypotheses 3 and 4; Regression Model 4 is used for testing Hypothesis 5

<sup>b</sup> Pseudo  $R^2$  is evaluated as the proportional reduction of levels 1 and level 2 error variance resulting from predictors (Snijders & Bosker, 1999)

Table 3, the coefficient of the relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge is diminished ( $\gamma = .19, p < .01$ ). These findings suggest a partial mediating effect of RBSE (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Following Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang's (2010) methods, we conducted a bootstrapping procedure to substantiate a cross-level indirect relationship in a more robust manner.<sup>1</sup> The results, based on 20,000 Monte Carlo replications, show that the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge via RBSE is significant (Indirect Effect = .06, 95 % CI = [.02, .10]). These results together provide strong support for Hypothesis 2.

<sup>1</sup> We calculated the compound coefficient, which was not normally distributed. Scholars recommend a Monte Carlo approach of re-sampling to obtain the confidence intervals for multilevel analysis because this method leads to narrower confidence intervals with more statistical precision (Loi, Chan, & Lam, 2014; Preacher & Selig, 2012). In our study, we constructed 95 % confidence intervals for the mediation effect based on 20,000 re-samples using a program written in R language (Preacher & Selig, 2012).

**Table 3** HLM results for followers' taking charge

| Variables  | Followers' taking charge |                      |                      |                      |                      |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|  | Model 1                  | Model 2 <sup>a</sup> | Model 3 <sup>a</sup> | Model 4 <sup>a</sup> | Model 5 <sup>a</sup> |
| Intercept  | 3.46***                  | 3.47***              | 3.44***              | 3.46***              | 3.45***              |
| Level 1 variables  |                          |                      |                      |                      |                      |
| Gender   | -.05                     | -.02                 | -.02                 | -.01                 | -.03                 |
| Age  | .08                      | .10                  | .07                  | .06                  | .04                  |
| Education level  | .05                      | .12                  | -.01                 | .00                  | -.02                 |
| Tenure   | -.08                     | -.09                 | -.09                 | -.08                 | -.07                 |
| Individual power distance orientation  | .08                      | .08                  | .09                  | .03                  | .03                  |
| RBSE   |                          |                      | .15*                 | .14*                 | .16**                |
| Level 2 variables  |                          |                      |                      |                      |                      |
| Group size   | .06                      | .04                  | .04                  | .03                  | .04                  |
| Leader tenure in current position  | .10                      | .08                  | .09                  | .08                  | .09                  |
| Differentiated empowering leadership   | -.09                     | -.00                 | -.07                 | -.06                 | -.05                 |
| Empowering leadership  |                          | .29**                | .19**                | .19**                | .18**                |
| Interaction variables  |                          |                      |                      |                      |                      |
| Empowering leadership × Differentiated empowering leadership   |                          |                      |                      | -.01                 | .02                  |
| Empowering leadership × Individual power distance orientation  |                          |                      |                      | .00                  | -.01                 |
| Differentiated empowering leadership × Individual power distance orientation                         |                          |                      |                      |                      | -.13                 |
| Empowering leadership × Differentiated empowering leadership × Individual power distance orientation |                          |                      |                      |                      | -.11**               |
| Pseudo $R^{2b}$  | .13                      | .14                  | .07                  | .14                  | .28                  |

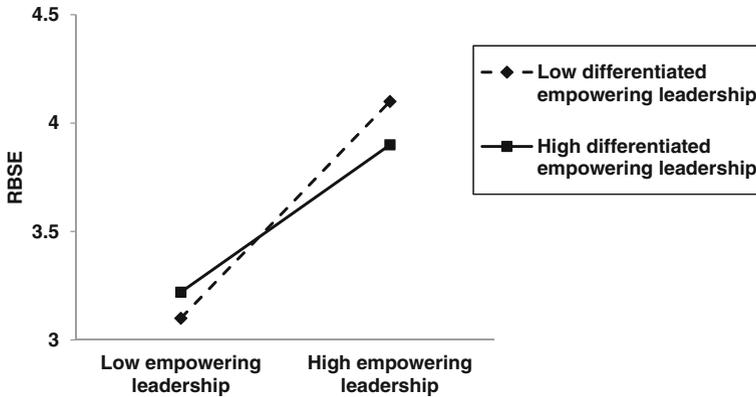
$N = 310$  at the individual level;  $N = 81$  at the group level. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , two-tailed test

<sup>a</sup> Regressions Model 2 and Model 3 are used for testing Hypothesis 2; Regression Model 4 is used for testing Hypotheses 3 and 4; Regression Model 5 is used for testing Hypothesis 5

<sup>b</sup> Pseudo  $R^2$  is evaluated as the proportional reduction of levels 1 and level 2 error variance resulting from predictors (Snijders & Bosker, 1999)

### The moderating effect of differentiated empowering leadership (H4)

Hypothesis 4 proposed that differentiated empowering leadership moderates the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge through RBSE. To examine this moderated mediation effect, we started by examining the simple two-way interaction between empowering leadership and differentiated empowering leadership and the relationship with RBSE. The results of Model 3 in Table 2 suggest that the interaction term of empowering leadership with differentiated empowering leadership has a significant and negative relationship with followers' RBSE ( $\gamma = -.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We then followed Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006) in



**Fig. 2** Interactive effects of empowering leadership and differentiated empowering leadership on followers' role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE)

conducting simple slope tests. Figure 2 depicts this interaction effect. It can be seen that the relationship between empowering leadership and followers' RBSE is more significant when the differentiated empowering leadership is low ( $\gamma = .46, p < .001$ ) rather than when it is high ( $\gamma = .32, p < .001$ ).

In accordance with prior research (e.g., Zhang, Lepine, Buckman, & Wei, 2014),<sup>2</sup> we followed the following steps to examine our cross-level moderated mediation effect. First, we calculated the simple slopes and the standard errors (Aiken & West, 1991; Preacher et al., 2006) for empowering leadership in predicting followers' RBSE (Path a; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002) under two conditions (high versus low differentiated empowering leadership) using data obtained from the asymptotic variance/covariance matrix of the regression coefficients produced by HLM. Second, we calculated Path b (i.e., followers' RBSE predicting their taking charge when controlling for empowering leadership, differentiated empowering leadership, and their interaction). Third, we obtained the indirect effect estimates (multiplying Path a by Path b) and then determined their 95 % confidence intervals by bootstrapping 20,000 replications. Last, we obtained the confidence intervals of the difference between the two indirect effect estimates by bootstrapping 20,000 replications using the R software (Preacher & Selig, 2012) to determine the significance of the difference.

Consistent with our expectations, the results obtained from the above analytical procedures show that empowering leadership is positively and indirectly related to followers' taking charge (via followers' RBSE) when the differentiated empowering leadership is both low (Estimate = .06, 95 % CI = [.002, .139]) and high (Estimate = .04, 95 % CI = [.001, .085]).<sup>3</sup> However, the result of the Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications suggests that the difference in the magnitude of the two indirect

<sup>2</sup> To demonstrate the multi-level moderated mediation effect, we need to construct the confidence intervals for the difference of the two conditional mediation effects (i.e., when the moderator is high versus low). If the confidence intervals for the difference contain zero, then the multi-level moderated mediation effect hypothesis should be rejected (c.f. Liu, Zhang, & Wang, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Estimate =  $a \times b$ ;  $a$  is the simple slope of empowering leadership predicting followers' RBSE as computed by the regression coefficients shown in Model 3 of Table 2;  $b$  is the regression coefficient of followers' RBSE predicting their taking charge (the data are shown in Model 4 of Table 3); the 95 % confidence interval was generated by the Monte Carlo technique with 20,000 replications.

relationships is significant (Difference =  $-.02$ , 95 % CI =  $[-.066, -.001]$ ). Taken together, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

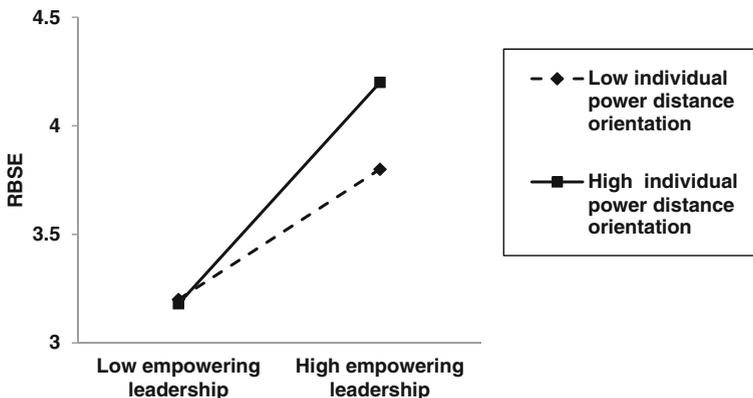
### The moderating effect of individual power distance orientation (H5)

Hypothesis 5 proposed another cross-level moderated mediation effect. Following the same procedures as those employed to test Hypothesis 4, we started by examining the simple two-way interaction between empowering leadership and individual power distance orientation in relation to RBSE. The results of Model 3 in Table 2 reveal that the interaction term of empowering leadership with individual power distance orientation is significantly and positively related to followers' RBSE ( $\gamma = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We again performed simple slope analyses and plotted the moderation effect as shown in Fig. 3 (Preacher et al., 2006). The relationship between empowering leadership and followers' RBSE is stronger among followers with a higher power distance orientation ( $\gamma = .49$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than among those with a lower power distance orientation ( $\gamma = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

With respect to the cross-level moderated mediation effect, the results of the Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications suggests that the indirect relationship (empowering leadership  $\rightarrow$  RBSE  $\rightarrow$  followers' taking charge) is stronger among followers with a high power distance orientation (Estimate =  $.07$ , 95 % CI =  $[.001, .134]$ ) than among followers with a low power distance orientation (Estimate =  $.04$ , 95 % CI =  $[.001, .085]$ ). The difference in the magnitude of the two indirect relationships is also significant (Difference =  $.03$ , 95 % CI =  $[.0001, .0657]$ ). Taking these results together, Hypothesis 5 is supported.

### Three-way interaction (H6)

Hypothesis 6 proposed an interactive effect of differentiated empowering leadership with individual power distance orientation in relation to the overall mediation relationship. We first examined the interactive effect of differentiated empowering leadership with individual power distance orientation on the relationship between empowering leadership and followers' RBSE. As shown in Model 4 in Table 2, the three-way



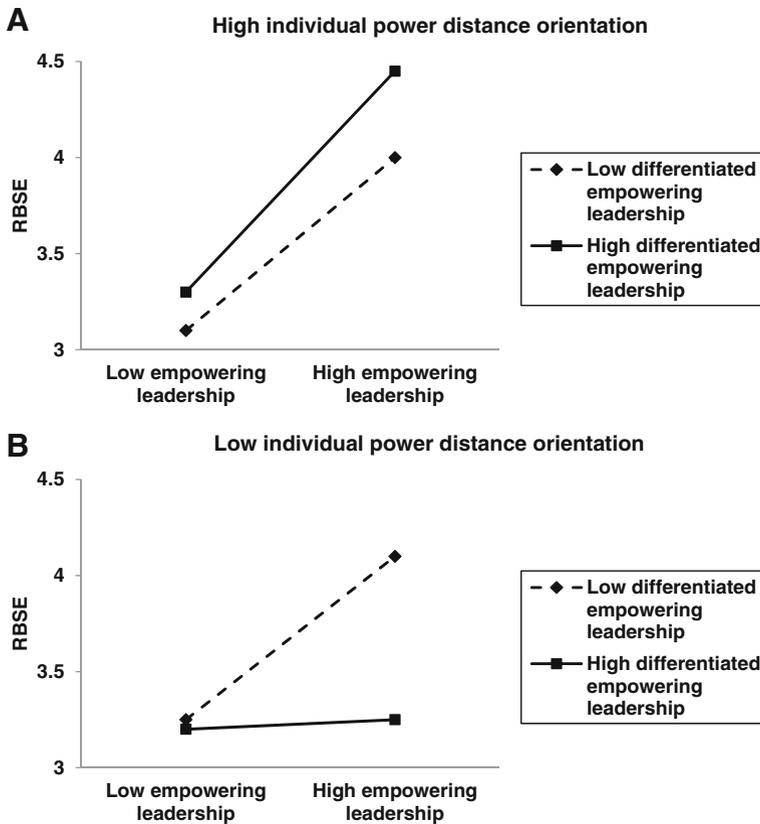
**Fig. 3** Interactive effects of empowering leadership and individual power distance orientation on followers' role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE)

interaction term (empowering leadership  $\times$  differentiated empowering leadership  $\times$  individual power distance orientation) is significantly related to RBSE ( $\gamma = .12, p < .05$ ). In line with Aiken and West (1991), we separately graphed the two-way interaction effect and conducted the simple slope tests under two conditions (among followers with high and low power distance orientations). Panel A in Fig. 4 shows that among followers with a high power distance orientation, the relationship between empowering leadership and followers' RBSE is positive when the differentiated empowering leadership is both low ( $\gamma = .50, p < .001$ ) and high ( $\gamma = .56, p < .001$ ), and the difference between the two simple slope estimates is not significant ( $t = .50, n.s.$ ). However, Panel B in Fig. 4 shows that among followers with a low power distance orientation, the relationship between empowering leadership and followers' RBSE is more positive when differentiated empowering leadership is low ( $\gamma = .46, p < .001$ ) rather than when differentiated empowering leadership is high ( $\gamma = .04, n.s.$ ). The difference between the two simple slope estimates is significant ( $t = 3.5, p < .001$ ), suggesting a significant interactive effect of empowering leadership with differentiated empowering leadership on RBSE.

Drawing on and extending Liu et al.'s (2012) procedures for testing two-way, multilevel, moderated mediation effects, we tested our three-way, multilevel, moderated mediation effect (H6) using the following steps. We first calculated the simple slopes and the standard errors for empowering leadership in predicting followers' RBSE (Path a; MacKinnon et al., 2002) under four conditions (2 [differentiated empowering leadership is high/low]  $\times$  2 [individual power distance orientation is high/low]) using the HLM regression results. Then, we calculated Path b (followers' RBSE predicting their taking charge when controlling for all the independent and interaction variables). We next obtained the four indirect effect estimates (multiplying the different Path a values by Path b values) and then ascertained their 95 % confidence intervals by bootstrapping 20,000 replications. Finally, we obtained the confidence intervals of the significance of the difference between any two of the four indirect effect estimates we were interested in by bootstrapping 20,000 replications using the R software (Preacher & Selig, 2012).

It can be seen that among followers with a high power distance orientation, empowering leadership's indirect effects on taking charge via RBSE were both positive and significant when differentiated empowering leadership was high (Estimate = .09, 95 % CI = [.02, .17]) and low (Estimate = .08, 95 % CI = [.02, .15]).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the difference in the magnitude of the two (high and low differentiated empowering leadership) indirect relationships is not significant (Difference = .01, 95 % CI = [-.04, .06]). In contrast, among followers with a low power distance orientation, the indirect effect of empowering leadership on followers' taking charge behavior through RBSE is significant and positive only when differentiated empowering leadership is low (Estimate = .07, 95 % CI = [.02, .14]), but it is not significant when differentiated empowering leadership is high (Estimate = .01, 95 % CI = [-.02, .04]). The difference between the two (high and low differentiated empowering leadership) indirect relationships is significant (Difference = -.06, 95 % CI = [-.15, -.01]). Based on these results,

<sup>4</sup> Estimate =  $a \times b$ ;  $a$  is the simple slope of empowering leadership predicting followers' RBSE as computed by the regression coefficients shown in Model 4 of Table 2;  $b$  is the regression coefficient of followers' RBSE predicting their taking charge (the data are shown in Model 5 of Table 3); the 95 % confidence interval was generated by the Monte Carlo technique with 20,000 replications.



**Fig. 4** Three-way interactive effects between empowering leadership, differentiated empowering leadership, individual power distance orientation on followers' role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE)

we conclude that individual power distance orientation weakens the moderating effect of differentiated empowering leadership on the mediation relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge via RBSE, thus supporting Hypothesis 6.

## Discussion

The goal of our study is to advance the growing body of literature regarding the effect of leadership on followers' proactive behavior (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007; Li et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2013) by examining *why* and *when* empowering leadership promotes followers' taking charge behavior in China. Data from 310 full-time employees in 81 work groups provide support for our research model. Overall, we find a positive cross-level relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge as mediated by RBSE. In addition, we demonstrate differentiated empowering leadership and individual power distance orientation as two significant boundary conditions. The results suggest that the mediation relationship is stronger when differentiated empowering leadership is low and when followers' power distance orientation is high.

In addition, the moderating effect of differentiated empowering leadership is found to be significant only among followers with a low power distance orientation. We next discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

### Theoretical implications

By revealing the underlying mechanism of role breadth self-efficacy in driving the relationship between empowering leadership and followers' taking charge, we make several important theoretical contributions to the literature. First, it extends Parker's (1998) initial work on the organizational determinants of RBSE by revealing a novel contextual predictor (i.e., empowering leadership) of RBSE. It also has parallels with Parker et al.'s (2006) empirical finding regarding the role of RBSE in transforming the contextual influences (i.e., empowering leadership) into followers' proactive behavior of taking charge. Second, whereas Li et al. (2014) demonstrated psychological empowerment as a mechanism explaining the empowering leadership and taking charge relationship, we offer another plausible explanation (i.e., RBSE). Although both psychological empowerment and RBSE can be defined as motivational constructs, they represent different perspectives in the motivational leadership research (Huang, 2012). Specifically, psychological empowerment reflects one's increased intrinsic motivation in terms of perceptions of meaning, competence, impact and self-determination orientated toward his/her in-role task (Spreitzer, 1995). RBSE, however, focuses particularly on the competence dimension and extends it to broader work areas beyond a person's in-role responsibilities. Third, this mediation relationship supports and extends the cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993) by showing that managerial practices of empowerment will motivate followers to engage in the proactive behavior of taking charge by enhancing their self-concept perceptions of RBSE.

With respect to the leadership literature, a growing body of research has taken a multilevel perspective to delineate the spillover process by which a leader's team-directed behaviors can influence individual followers (e.g., Chen et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2010). Our finding that differentiated empowering leadership impedes the positive cross-level effects of empowering leadership on followers' outcomes extends the team-directed empowering leadership research by highlighting this important group-level construct. It also contributes to the emerging literature of differentiated leadership by extending the focus on differentiation in the stable exchange relationships between leader-follower dyads (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Liden et al., 2006) to the differentiation in leaders' specific empowering behaviors (e.g., Wu et al., 2010). Moreover, this finding is consistent with the motivational practice-cultural value congruence argument presented in the cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993), suggesting that it may be useful to take cultural differences into account in resolving the theoretical debate on the effects of differentiated leadership.

The negative effect of differentiated empowering leadership is also consistent with findings from previous leadership research conducted in Asian countries. Past research suggests that individually-focused motivational leadership behaviors are less influential in motivating people in collectivistic cultures (Huang, 2012). For instance, Ishikawa (2012) found in Japanese R&D teams that transformational leadership, which includes behaviors of individualized consideration and differentiated intellectual stimulation,

prevented Japanese employees from going above and beyond their in-role obligations to voluntarily take leadership roles in a team. Liao et al. (2010) found that LMX differentiation impeded the positive effect of LMX on Chinese team members' self-efficacy. These empirical evidences along with ours support Erez and Earley's (1993) theoretical prediction that in collectivistic cultures, group-centered managerial practices should have superior motivational effects on individual self-concept perceptions (e.g., RBSE) than individual-centered practices.

Finally, our moderation findings regarding individual power distance orientation respond to scholars' calls that it is pivotal to take into account individual cultural values in evaluating leadership effectiveness (e.g., Avolio & Locke, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lam et al., 2012; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007). While a handful of research has examined the moderating effect of power distance orientation in relation to the effects of leadership on followers' outcomes (e.g., Kirkman et al., 2009), the findings are rather mixed (Huang, 2012), and none of these studies have examined empowering leadership. We have theorized and demonstrated a positive moderating effect of high power distance orientation in the particular mediation relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge via RBSE. Along with prior research findings (e.g., Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012; Yang, et al., 2010), this finding supports the ideas of cultural self-representation model, which posit that the social learning mechanism underpinning the positive effects of motivational leadership on follower behaviors tend to be more influential among high power distance orientation followers.

Our results also show that individual power distance orientation affects the moderating effect of differentiated empowering leadership in the mediation relationship between empowering leadership and taking charge via RBSE. This three-way interactive finding has important implications for the cultural self-representation model (Erez & Earley, 1993). Specifically, although this model explains why individual cultural values have direct relevance for the regulatory or motivational effects of managerial practices (i.e., the congruence between a practice and an individual value), it provides less clarity on whether a managerial practice is motivational when it has conflicting influences on individuals' multiple values. Our finding that the negative moderating effect of highly differentiated empowering leadership will be weaker among Chinese people with a high power distance orientation suggests that multiple cultural values (i.e., collectivism and power distance orientation) may have joint and compensating effects on followers' reactions toward a managerial practice (i.e., differentiated empowerment). This theoretical extension can be used to explain Loi et al.'s (2012) finding regarding the three-way interaction effect of procedural justice, ethical leadership, and power distance on Chinese employees' job insecurity. Specifically, although ethical leadership was found to strengthen the negative effect of procedural justice on individual job insecurity, the synergetic effect of procedural justice and ethical leadership was less significant among Chinese with high power distance orientation, owing to their inner value and preference of an autocratic management style which conflicts with ethical leadership.

### **Practical implications**

Our findings provide several insights into managerial interventions for cultivating employee proactive behavior of taking charge. First of all, our study illustrates that

empowering leaders play a key role in motivating followers' taking charge. Thus, to better motivate employees to perform this desirable proactive behavior at the workplace, organizations need to pay increased attention to the managerial selection processes and to actively train their leaders to be empowering. Indeed, research suggests that some aspects of a leader's personality are associated with failure to empower, including a high need for achievement, and difficulty in forming relationships with others (Yukl, 2013). In addition, the proactive behaviors of taking charge seldom happen overnight. Our results indicate that RBSE, which is a psychological state, precedes the actual behaviors of taking charge. Hence, keeping track of followers' RBSE is a useful way for leaders to monitor whether their empowering behaviors can ultimately enhance followers' taking charge behaviors.

Finally, our results suggest that, in collectivistic societies such as China, leaders who implement differentiated empowering behaviors within a work group can erode the positive effect of empowering behaviors on taking charge via RBSE, especially among followers with a low power distance orientation. Accordingly, we offer two suggestions to leaders. First, leaders should display high levels of group-centered empowering leadership to all group members equally (i.e., low differentiated empowering leadership) to promote the highest levels of taking charge behaviors. Second, when performing individual-centered empowering behaviors (i.e., high differentiated empowering leadership) leaders need to be sensitive to the followers' power distance orientation. This is because even though empowering differently among group members may still be influential to followers with high power distance orientation, it is unlikely to motivate followers who are low in power distance orientation.

### Limitations and future research directions

Although we have made a number of important contributions, this research is not without limitations. The most notable is the cross-sectional nature of our study, which precludes us from making strong causal inferences. Therefore, we encourage future researchers to collect longitudinal data or design experimental studies to replicate our findings. Another limitation is that we solely test our culture-based research model in China, which may limit the generalizability of our research findings. Empowering leadership scholars should conduct additional research in other cultures and reveal additional boundary conditions of empowering leadership. For instance, although we considered the contingency of cultural values at the individual level, we overlooked firm-level cultural differences. Research suggests that Chinese people tend to prefer differential rules for resource allocation in firms that had experienced a greater degree of ownership reform (He, Chen, & Zhang, 2004) or with an economic goal orientation (Chen, 1995). Thus, future research should examine the cultural self-representation model more closely by taking into account more firm-level factors, such as organizational culture and ownership type.

This study has several implications for future research on empowering leadership and differentiated leadership. We are the first to operationalize differentiated empowering leadership in the Chinese context and more attention needs to be paid to this operationalization across different contexts. In addition, future research should examine the similarities and differences between differentiated empowering leadership and the existing differentiated leadership constructs, such as LMX differentiation (e.g.,

Liden et al., 2006) or differentiated transformational leadership (e.g., Wu et al., 2010). Finally, we urge future researchers to take into account more cultural values, individual differences, and contextual factors when examining followers' reactions to differentiated empowering leadership. For example, individuals with low Chinese traditionalism may react less negatively to differentiated empowering leadership because low traditionalists have high acceptance to the differential rules for resource allocation (Farh et al., 1997). Moreover, according to Chen's (1995) empirical findings, it is very likely that followers will maintain positive attitudes to the differentiated empowering leadership when the differentiation is based on followers' ability, performance, and actual contributions to the organization.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we draw on the cultural self-representation model to explain the cognitive and behavioral consequences of empowering leadership. We demonstrate that empowering leadership leads to a heightened sense of role breadth self-efficacy, which in turn leads to increased taking charge, especially when differentiated empowering leadership is low and among followers whose power distance orientation is high. Although the literature on empowering and differentiated leadership is still nascent, we hope our research is a first step toward a more complete understanding of empowering leadership and its effects on job attitudes and organizational behavior.

**Acknowledgments** This research was supported by the National Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 71232001, 71402061)

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