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To cite this article: Mathieu Molines, Assaad El Akremi, Martin Storme & Pinar Celik (2022) Beyond the tipping point: the curvilinear relationships of transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, and emotional exhaustion in the French police, Public Management Review, 24:1, 80-105, DOI: [10.1080/14719037.2020.1795231](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1795231)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1795231>

Published online: 22 Jul 2020.

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Beyond the tipping point: the curvilinear relationships of transformational leadership, leader–member exchange, and emotional exhaustion in the French police

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ABSTRACT

As one promise of transformational leadership (TFL), it inspires public servants to perform beyond expectations and embrace needed change. However, it remains unclear whether TFL is linked to reduced stress and exhaustion or whether ‘performance beyond expectations’ comes at the expense of followers’ increased stress. In line with the ‘too-much-of-a-good-thing’ effect, this article contributes to our understanding of leadership in public organizations by investigating the curvilinear effect of TFL on emotional exhaustion through interpersonal relationships with the leader (LMX). The results based on a two-wave study of 806 French police officers support the expectation of a curvilinear relationship.

KEYWORDS Transformational leadership; leader–member exchange; emotional exhaustion; police; too-much-of-a-good-thing effect

Introduction

Transformational leadership (TFL) theory is one of the most prominent frameworks for understanding leadership in public organizations (Vogel and Masal 2015; Ospina 2017; Crosby and Bryson 2018). Few leadership styles have received as much research attention as TFL (Lin, Scott, and Matta 2019; Siangchokyoo, Klinger, and Campion 2019). TFL is intended to inspire followers to perform beyond expectations and embrace needed change (Bass 1985). In turn, TFL is designed to ‘influence followers’ values and aspirations, activate their higher order-needs, and arouse them to transcend self-interests for the sake of the organization’ (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Bommer 1996, 259–260). Despite criticisms of in-depth theories and methodologies of TFL constructs (van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013; Jensen and Bro 2018; Siangchokyoo, Klinger, and Campion 2019), research has shown that performing behaviours from the TFL repertoire relates significantly to a variety of individual, group, and organizational outcomes (Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramaniam 1996; Judge and Piccolo 2004; Wang et al. 2011) and is particularly effective in public sector organizations (Wright and

Grant 2010; Oberfield 2012; Wright, Moynihan, and Pandey 2012; Bellé 2013; Sun and Henderson 2017; Sun and Wang 2017).

As a result, it is currently assumed that transformational leadership is a ‘universally positive management practice’ (Li et al. 2013), and public organizations are adopting TFL as the prime mover of effective change (Stazyk and Davis 2020). Public leaders have been awarded a pivotal role in driving change and are believed to play an active role in decision making and in deploying resources in shaping organizational success (Sun and Henderson 2017; Schmidt and Groeneveld 2019) as well as in mitigating risks of work stressors affecting public servants’ health and wellbeing (Mostafa 2016).

However, little attention has been devoted to the dark side of TFL and to its effects on health outcomes such as work stress (Li et al. 2013; Lin, Scott, and Matta 2019). According to a meta-analysis by Harms et al. (2017), disagreement persists regarding the role of leadership in stress-related outcomes. Leadership can act as either a major source of stress for followers or as a buffer against work stressors (see Skakon et al. 2010; Montano et al. 2017). Thus, failing to consider the potential detriments of transformational leader behaviours is a significant oversight considering that an emerging body of research suggests that engaging in ‘good’ leadership behaviours can be costly to leaders themselves (Lin, Scott, and Matta 2019) as well as to followers (Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies 2018). For instance, it could be argued that TFL may be particularly taxing because followers might spend longer hours working and may dedicate more energy to their work, resulting in health-compromising levels of stress (Arnold and Connelly 2013). For example, recent studies suggest that motivations to serve society and sacrifice oneself might have negative effects on wellbeing because public servants go ‘above and beyond’ what is asked and thus deplete their own resources (Giauque, Anderfuhren-Biget, and Varone 2013; van Loon, Vandenabeele, and Leisink 2015).

We propose that TFL can have positive as well as negative side of followers’ stress-related outcomes. In this study, we focus on burnout – a manifestation of prolonged stress on the job – and its central dimension, emotional exhaustion, which generally is more closely related to leaders’ behaviour than stress (Harms et al. 2017). Research on the relationship between TFL and burnout (including emotional exhaustion) yields inconsistent and inconclusive findings (i.e. negative, positive, or null effects) (e.g. Seltzer, Numerof, and Bass 1989; Corrigan et al. 2002; Nielsen and Daniels 2012). It remains unclear whether TFL is linked to reduced stress and exhaustion among followers or whether ‘performance beyond expectations’ comes at the expense of increased stress and exhaustion (Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies 2018).

The aim of this article is to investigate and better understand the relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion among French police officers and to highlight the potential dark side of TFL in public organizations. First, in light of recent advances in management theories, we rely on the now widely established ‘too-much-of-a-good-thing’ (TMGT) effect (Pierce and Aguinis 2013), which challenges the assumption that more of a desirable behaviour is always preferable, which questions the unilateral benefits of TFL. While prior studies have mainly focused on leaders’ influences on followers’ reactions and behaviours in monotonically increasing or decreasing patterns, researchers have begun to challenge this traditional approach (Cavarretta et al. 2015; Antonakis, House, and Simonton 2017; Vergauwe et al. 2018) and explore the

idea of a ‘dark side’ of leadership. According to Busse, Mahlendorf, and Bode (2016), the TMGT effect can be defined as

a situation in which the incremental costs caused by an antecedent variable become larger than the incremental benefits, which creates a success maximum. The antecedent itself is neither good nor bad; rather, it generates both benefits and costs that vary in their marginal effects depending on the value of the antecedent (pp.142–143).

The inconsistent effects of TFL on emotional exhaustion may reflect a curvilinear pattern that may not fully capture the effects of leadership given the ‘unintended effects’ that result when TFL reaches excessively high levels (Cavarretta et al. 2015). We argue that there is a point at which performing behaviours from the TFL repertoire no longer reduces followers’ levels of exhaustion; at this point, such behaviours become demands or hindrances that actually *increase* exhaustion.

Second, understanding the processes by which transformational leaders exert their influence is an important and fundamental focus of leadership research (Boer et al. 2016). Accordingly, it is worth investigating how the curvilinear effects of TFL on exhaustion are mediated by costs and benefits (Busse, Mahlendorf, and Bode 2016). Additionally, studies consistently suggest that building positive interpersonal relations (leader–member exchange [LMX]) (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995) serves as an important mediating mechanism through which transformational leaders affect employees’ workplace outcomes such as performance and organizational citizenship behaviours (Wang et al. 2005; Dulebohn et al. 2012; Ng 2017). Researchers have advanced the notion that social relationships at work – specifically, employees’ perceptions of the quality of their relationships to their supervisors – affect stress-related outcomes such as exhaustion (Harms et al. 2017; Tse et al. 2018).

In this study, we investigate the curvilinear effect of TFL on emotional exhaustion through the mediating mechanism of LMX. We draw on conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll 1989) and social exchange theory (SET) (Gouldner 1960; Blau 1964), which offer complementary insights into the U-shaped process that links TFL to emotional exhaustion. As stated by Crosby and Bryson (2018), leadership is not a ‘magic concept’ and more attention should be dedicated to understanding the cause-effect relationships of leadership with an emphasis on theory building and testing, methods and practice. Our study combines both leader-centric perspectives (TFL) and follower-centric processes (LMX), COR, and SET theories to develop a more thorough understanding of the complex relationships between leadership and stress in public organizations (Vogel and Masal 2015).

We take advantage of a large sample of French police officers. French police forces have recently implemented a reform to create a service-oriented policing strategy requiring the use of a new leadership approach that is conducive to discretionary policing and that empowers subordinates to make decisions that are reflective of the police organization’s mission (Russell, Cole, and Iii 2014; Hassan, Park, and Raadschelders 2018). Rather than command and control, police leadership is more concerned with ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of police officers and citizens (Skogan and Harnett 1997). Accumulating evidence suggests that TFL is particularly effective in the various national police organizations where it has been studied (see Haberfeld 2006). TFL seems appropriate for developing long-term service- and citizen-oriented relationships (Liao and Chuang 2007; Liaw, Chi, and Chuang 2010; Bro and Jensen 2020). Furthermore, prior research has shown that TFL, with its emphasis on a shift

‘from personal goals to collective goals, from personal identity to collective identity, from self-interest to collective interest’ (Jiao, Richards, and Zhang 2011, 14), is relevant and prevalent in public organizations, such as in police organizations, where there are strong expectations of group loyalty and commitment to collective citizenship (Campbell, Lee, and Im 2016; Sun and Wang 2017). In addition to this strategic change, the French police must face a difficult context with severe consequences for police officer health. Overwork since a series of terrorist attacks starting in January 2015 and weekly, often extremely violent anti-government protests since November 2019 by the Yellow vests movement seeking more economic and social justice have had deleterious effects on individual police officer wellbeing. Police officers now suffer from exhaustion (with a total of more than 20 million overtime hours accumulated, mostly due to terrorist attacks) and increased suicide rates (51 cases in 2017) as underlined in a recent senatorial report (Zagrodzki 2017). These data provide an interesting opportunity to examine how leadership practices (TFL and LMX) relate to emotional exhaustion experienced by French police officers.

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Curvilinear relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion

Transformational leaders are theorized to achieve superior results with their followers than those adopting other leadership styles (Bass and Riggio 2006) in part because they act as role models to their followers, exhibit integrity; inspire and motivate; intellectually stimulate; and are considerate, charismatic, and trustworthy (Bass and Bass 2008). TFL is conceptualized as having four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass and Riggio 2006). These dimensions combine into one higher-order TFL construct (Avolio, Bass, and Jung 1999). Idealized influence characterizes the extent to which leaders engage in behaviours that encourage followers to identify with them (Judge and Piccolo 2004). Inspirational motivation denotes the extent to which leaders behave in ways that motivate followers by providing meaning and showing optimism and enthusiasm about goals and the future. Intellectual stimulation characterizes the extent to which leaders challenge existing assumptions and encourage followers’ critical reflection by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways. Individual consideration denotes the extent to which leaders seek to meet the individual needs of their followers by acting as their coaches and listening to their concerns (Judge and Piccolo 2004).

Hobfoll’s (1989, 2001) COR theory has been used to explain the effects of leadership on exhaustion (Harms et al. 2017). As the central tenet of COR theory, individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources and seek to maximize resource gains while minimizing resource losses and avoiding potential threats. Resources are defined as ‘anything perceived by the individual to help attain his or her goals’ (Halbesleben et al. 2014, 1338). Individuals also experience stress when the things that they value (i.e. their resources or their sense of duty) are under threat of loss or are lost or when insufficient resources are gained following previous investments. The emotional exhaustion that results depletes the coping resources that individuals need to meet emotional demands in the workplace (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001). When such individuals’ resources have been depleted and they fail to generate

additional resources, they are likely to experience exhaustion (Wright and Cropanzano 1998). To counteract this loss, individuals 'call on resources available to them from the environment' (Hobfoll 1989, 517).

According to Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies (2018), TFL is a contextual resource that forms part of a social context. TFL influences the pool of resources available to followers (Halbesleben 2006) and therefore provides an 'advantage' in terms of resource gains (Arnold et al. 2015). To the extent that transformational leaders can reduce ambiguity, provide guidance for efforts, or encourage followers to pursue new avenues for growth, they can reduce police officers' experiences of exhaustion (Bass and Bass 2008; Diebig, Bormann, and Rowold 2016). Furthermore, police leaders can project positive outlooks and visions, thereby providing reassurance in times of stress (Bono and Ilies 2006). By providing support, transformational leaders buffer the harmful effects of stressful job environments (Nielsen et al. 2008; Diebig, Bormann, and Rowold 2016). For example, TFL may temper negative effects of time pressure by encouraging police officers to see demands as a challenge that can be addressed. Second, transformational leaders instil confidence in police officers in their abilities to complete their tasks and attain civic objectives (Bass and Riggio 2006). Transformational leaders continuously develop and empower their subordinates by working on their strengths and weaknesses (Bass 1985). Hence, police officers learn new behaviours and develop skills to cope with pressure. Consequently, we expect TFL behaviours to be associated with clear, positive visions that reassure subordinates, allow them to deploy their resources effectively, and reduce exhaustion (Montano et al. 2017).

Despite this COR-related rationale, empirical studies of the links between TFL and exhaustion yield inconsistent findings (Arnold and Connelly 2013; Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies 2018). Seltzer, Numerof, and Bass (1989) suggest a positive relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion in which a leader's idealized influence leads employees to put in longer hours at work and devote more energy to their work roles. In such cases, intellectual stimulation and the uncertainty and risk involved in doing things differently are potential threats to wellbeing, and the focus on group orientation discourages employees from considering their own health-related needs. Other studies indicate a positive relationship between TFL and burnout or employee strain (Franke and Felfe 2011; Arnold et al. 2015). However, some studies fail to find any significant relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion (Stordeur, D'Hoore, and Vandenberghe 2001; Corrigan et al. 2002; Densten 2005; Hetland, Sandal, and Johnsen 2007).

Such inconclusive findings suggest the potential for a curvilinear relationship and the TMGT effect. As Pierce and Aguinis (2013) argue, the TMGT effect occurs when ordinarily beneficial antecedents (e.g. TFL) reach inflection points, after which their relationships with desired outcomes (reducing exhaustion) cease to be linear and negative. It is always undesirable to exceed these inflection points, as this leads to waste (no additional benefit), or worse, undesirable outcomes (increased exhaustion). Accordingly, we argue that more frequent TFL behaviours are not always beneficial for followers; TFL inadequacy may entail either an underprovision or overprovision of behaviours, such as articulating inspiring visions, modelling idealized behaviours, offering intellectual stimulation, or giving individualized consideration. Such TFL inadequacies could be detrimental to police officers by increasing their levels of emotional exhaustion.

According to COR theory, police leaders who consistently demand that police officers go beyond their performance expectations are likely to drain employees' psychological resources; such supervisors may also be perceived as personal threats or threats to material resources (Carlson et al. 2012). Conversely, as transformational leaders increase resources beyond the point at which police officers are concerned with the protection or restoration of depleted vital resources, these police officers become satiated, and less positive outcomes will be associated with the leaders' behaviours.

In relying on the theoretical rationale of COR theory, we offer insights into how TFL behaviours might go beyond the tipping point at which they have a positive impact on emotional exhaustion. After this inflection point (the point at which further increases in the 'desirable' variable are no longer beneficial, i.e. the TMGT effect), TFL may become detrimental to followers. Accordingly, we argue that TFL reduces emotional exhaustion only to the point at which there is no additional benefit from more perceived TFL.

Hypothesis 1. TFL has a curvilinear (i.e. U-shaped) relationship to emotional exhaustion among police officers.

LMX as a mediator of the curvilinear relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion

We delve into the black box of the relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion to better understand why TFL might backfire. We investigate the underlying mechanisms that intervene in this relationship. As suggested by Gerstner and Day (1997), follower-supervisor relationships offer a lens through which to view the entire work experience. Studies have recently suggested that building positive interpersonal relations (LMX) is an important means through which transformational leaders affect employees' organizational outcomes (Wang et al. 2005; Dulebohn et al. 2012).

We argue that the explanatory mechanism underlying the curvilinear relationship between TFL and exhaustion resides in LMX theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995), which is grounded in SET (Blau 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960). LMX theory states that leaders enter individually negotiated relationships with each of their subordinates and do not treat all employees equally (Dansereau, Graen, and Haga 1975). Generally speaking, the realities of the workplace force leaders to divide their resources and support among subordinates such that only a select few receive resources that go above and beyond those formally defined in employment contracts (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). Followers who receive additional and valued resources have high-quality LMX relationships and are subject to strong internal forces that compel them to repay their supervisors (Sekiguchi, Burton, and Sablinski 2008). Such relationships are characterized by trust, respect, and mutual obligation. In contrast, followers who receive only the minimum resources defined by their employment contracts are typically regarded as little more than 'hired hands' (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995); they experience less obligation to expend valued resources in an attempt to satisfy direct supervisors.

Empirical work suggests that LMX acts as a mediator between TFL and different performance outcomes (Wang et al. 2005). However, as Boer et al. (2016) note through their meta-analysis, the relational process underpinning TFL does not work for all outcomes, and theoretical underpinnings should be distinguished according to

outcome characteristics. The idea of LMX as a mediator of the curvilinear TFL–emotional exhaustion relationship would be theoretically supported, in part, by three main effects: (1) the curvilinear relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion (see Hypothesis 1), (2) the linear relationship between TFL and LMX, and (3) a curvilinear relationship between LMX and emotional exhaustion. We draw on an integrated theoretical rationale that combines COR theory with SET to explain these effects.

Relationship between TFL and LMX

We propose that TFL acts as an antecedent of LMX. Recent meta-analyses identify a robust, positive association between TFL and LMX (Ng 2017). According to Ng (2017), LMX is the most proximal and immediate reaction to TFL. Transformational leaders create environments that enrich the LMX process (Wang et al. 2005). In this way, TFL is an antecedent of the creation of strong, enduring LMX relationships. Transformational leaders support their followers through individualized consideration (Zacher et al. 2014) such that followers are likely to perceive their exchanges as of high quality (Chun, Cho, and Sosik 2016). This individualized and considerate behaviour is unique to transformational leaders and is key to enhancing the quality of social exchange between leaders and followers due to strengthened reciprocation norms (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Followers led by transformational leaders are more likely to admire their leaders for their charisma, and wisdom, thereby imbuing their relationships with respect and trust (Ospina 2017).

Furthermore, transformational leaders are willing to invest time and effort in cultivating relationships with followers, who are seen as important long-term assets that help teams. Transformational leaders grant resources and can be instrumental in achieving high-quality LMX, as they create favourable environments for developing mutual understanding in supervisor–subordinate dyads that enable subordinates to meet their supervisors' expectations more effectively. Specifically, dyadic interaction conditions are variables that characterize the tenure, frequency, and quality of dyadic communication between supervisors and subordinates (Gerstner and Day 1997). In this sense, TFL behaviours strengthen mutual understanding and reinforce supervisors' affection for their subordinates (Ashkanasy and Tse 2000). Accordingly, we suggest that TFL has a linear, positive relationship to LMX.

Relationship between LMX and emotional exhaustion

The few studies that have empirically investigated the relationship between LMX and emotional exhaustion (Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema 2005; Thomas and Lankau 2009; Son, Kim, and Kim 2014; Harms et al. 2017) have shown that those involved in high-quality LMX relationships experience fewer role stressors. The rationale for this finding stems from role theory (Liden, Sparrowe, and Wayne 1997): leaders of individuals involved in high-quality LMX relationships provide emotional support, stronger communication, and clearly defined roles for their subordinates, which help those subordinates eliminate uncertainty and keep their levels of stress and exhaustion low. Conversely, those engaged in low-quality LMX relationships experience higher levels of stress and exhaustion, as they do not receive adequate information to alleviate their feelings of uncertainty.

According to COR theory, LMX also functions as a valued resource for subordinates. Hobfoll (1989) argues that interpersonal relations are resources to the extent that they provide or facilitate the attainment of other valuable resources. For example, supervisors provide emotional and informational support to subordinates by engaging in high-quality exchange relationships. When effective dyadic relationships are established, supervisors offer sensitivity, information, and support to their subordinates (Dienesch and Liden 1986). Subordinates who receive more material and social resources achieve the job performance that supervisors expect (Jensen, Olberding, and Rodgers 1997). As a result, supervisors assign them additional tasks (Dienesch and Liden 1986) and view them as more promotable candidates. This interactive process indicates that LMX bestows subordinates with valuable emotional and tangible benefits that render them better able to achieve performance and career success. Because of its effectiveness for high-performance outcomes, LMX is valued and desired by subordinates. Subordinates therefore use TFL resources to develop high-quality LMX.

However, Harris and Kacmar (2006) show that a U-shape form characterizes the relationship between LMX quality and stress. Specifically, stress levels are high when LMX quality is low, decrease when LMX quality is moderate to moderately high, and increase again when LMX quality is high. Those who enjoy high-quality LMX relationships with their supervisors experience more stress than their counterparts involved in moderate-quality LMX relationships. According to Harris and Kacmar (2006), this result stems from the extra pressures and obligations that subordinates involved in high-quality LMX relationships experience to go above and beyond their duties, reduce their feelings of obligation, and meet the expectations of their admired bosses (Blau 1964).

According to SET, the more people become interdependent, the more they give, receive, and return to their partners (Blau 1964). As explained by Bernerth, Walker, and Harris (2016), repeated successful exchanges with the same partners elicit positive reactions, as relationship balance is achieved; persistent imbalance instead elicits negative reactions, as feelings of indebtedness or non-reciprocity develop (Carnevale et al. 2020). In this sense, social exchange is a self-reinforcing process that is intertwined with affect (Walter and Bruch 2008). However, not all relationships are defined by equitable giving and receiving; many relationships result in negative outcomes when people perceive imbalances between what they give and what they receive. Unbalanced social exchange relationships in the workplace expose employees to one-way exchanges/losses of resources that initiate negative outcomes such as emotional exhaustion (Thomas and Lankau 2009). If at some point the requests of police leaders overwhelm subordinates, those requests may lead to increased levels of exhaustion as police officers move from positive to negative outcomes of LMX. As suggested by Bernerth, Walker, and Harris (2016), high levels of LMX can have negative effects due to challenges between resource reciprocity and self-protection. In examining both parts of LMX theory simultaneously, we predict that at a certain point, for subordinates, the benefits of having high-quality relationships with their supervisors no longer counteract the demands placed on them, thereby increasing their levels of exhaustion (Edwards 1992). For subordinates, there is a point of diminishing returns at which the aggregation of felt obligations (Carnevale et al. 2020) is no longer counteracted by increased support and communication from their supervisors.

Hypothesis 2. LMX mediates the curvilinear (i.e. U-shaped) relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion for police officers.

Materials and methods

Participants and procedure

We collected data from the French police force, which is one of the country's most important employers, with approximately 149,000 police officers. The French police force is in charge of urban areas where most public safety issues and police-community conflicts take place. Although the French police force is dependent on a central authority (and thus directly answerable to the government), each police station functions as an autonomous unit with one senior police leader held responsible for managing local officers (Molines, Sanséau, and Adamovic 2017).

French police are managed under a bureaucratic system involving the specialization of tasks and duties, objective qualifications for positions, action according to rules and regulations, and hierarchical authority (Monjardet 1997). Police officers mostly operate under an authoritarian command structure in which orders flow one way and top down (i.e. high power distance). However, various works in sociology report a process of hierarchical inversion specific to police organizations that emerges from a police officer's autonomy in the field (van Maanen 1975). Indeed, policing requires that enough initiative capacity be left to the police officer in the field. Police officers need to be able to select tasks to be performed and how they will achieve them to face the uncertainties of the different situations in their everyday routines. However, if the 'hierarchy has no control over action, it has control over men'. Police leaders play a central role in the rating of their subordinates that directly affects their salaries and career advancement. These leaders also control numerous other significant elements such as managing relationships with external sponsors, budgets, or materials (Monjardet 1997). These specificities seem to hold across different police forces in the world (Haberfeld 2006).

We collected data from the mailing lists of the police trade unions of 35 selected police stations, which contain the contact information of street police officers whose primary responsibility is to ensure public order at demonstrations and riots. We sent the participants an Internet link that informed them of the purpose of the research and guaranteed that their responses would be kept confidential, assuring them that no organizational representative would have access to their responses. No ordinary police officers, senior officers, or trade union officials saw the completed surveys. We also indicated the voluntary nature of participation. We asked that the questionnaires be completed within two weeks and sent a reminder after one week.

We administered online surveys at two points of measurement separated by an average of eight weeks to reduce biases pertaining to our data collection methods (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). To match participants' responses across the two waves and to corresponding police stations, we asked the participants to generate identification codes. In the first wave of data collection, we included measures of TFL and control variables (age, gender, and seniority). We assessed the mediating and dependent variables, LMX and emotional exhaustion, in the second questionnaire.

Leadership constructs (TFL and LMX) referred to participants' direct supervisors (i.e. senior police officers).

At Time 1, we sent 1,308 questionnaires and collected responses from 1,036 police officers, of which we excluded 5 due to missing data or identification codes. At Time 2, we received the responses of 847 police officers. We excluded 6 participants due to missing data or identification codes. Matching the two questionnaires yielded a sample of 806 complete responses (76% response rate for all respondents at Time 1). To determine whether subject attrition led to non-random sampling, we tested whether the probability of remaining in the sample at Time 2 was predicted by Time 1 variables (Goodman and Blum 1996). We carried out logistic regression to predict the response to one measurement occasion (vs. responses to both Time 1 and Time 2), which revealed that employees who provided incomplete answers at one of the two measurement points did not significantly differ by gender or study variables from those who completed both questionnaires. However, older participants ($B = 0.03$, $z = 3.01$, $p < .01$) and those with more seniority ($B = 0.03$, $z = 3.36$, $p < .001$) were more likely to respond to one phase only.

Our final sample includes 806 police officers from 35 French police stations. The average number of respondents per police station is 23.03. The average age of the respondents is 37.70 years ($SD. = 7.39$), and 92.18% are men. We should note that our sample is mostly composed of male police officers and thus cannot be considered representative of the whole French police. The participants' average tenure with the police force was 14.66 years ($SD. = 7.81$).

Measures

We translated all scales from English to French using a back-translation procedure (Brislin 1980).

TFL

We used 16 items from the short version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X (Avolio, Bass, and Jung 1999), as in previous studies (Kark, Shamir, and Chen 2003; Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies 2018), including items reflecting the following behavioural components: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. In line with previous studies, due to the strong intercorrelations across the four dimensions of TFL, we averaged the items to compose an overall measure of TFL. We asked participants to denote the frequency with which their leader engaged in each of the behaviours on a 5-point scale. A sample item reads: 'My direct supervisor seeks differing perspectives when solving problems.' The coefficient alpha was .94.

Emotional exhaustion

We assessed emotional exhaustion using eight items from Maslach and Jackson's (1981) emotional exhaustion measure (MBI). We gauged responses using a scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). A sample item reads: 'I am emotionally drained from my work.' The coefficient alpha was .90.

LMX

We used a short version of the 12-item LMX–MDM scale from Liden and Maslyn (1998) containing 8 items to measure individual perceptions of the quality of relationships between supervisors and their employees. The LMX–MDM scale is a multidimensional measure of LMX quality. We collected data from the perspective of subordinates and measured them on a scale ranging from 1 ('not at all') to 5 ('extremely'). A sample item reads: 'I like my direct supervisor very much as a person.' The coefficient alpha was .96.

Control variables

To reduce the likelihood of possible alternative explanations, we also collected demographic data that may affect followers' perceptions of TFL, LMX, and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, we controlled for the effects of age, gender, and police seniority.

Analytic strategy

We used multilevel modelling to test our hypotheses in Mplus 7.0 (Muthén and Muthén 2015), as the studied police officers are employed at precincts (police stations); TFL, LMX, and emotional exhaustion were thus used as individual (Level 1) variables. All predictor variables were grand mean centred as recommended by Hofmann, Griffin, and Gavin (2000). We computed squared terms on the centred scores for TFL and LMX. For all analyses, we controlled for the age, gender, and seniority of the police officers, as each of these features may affect the leadership constructs (TFL and LMX) and emotional exhaustion.

Our theoretical model tests nonlinear mediation from TFL (X) to emotional exhaustion (Y) through LMX (M). Specifically, our model can be described by the following set of equations (excluding control variables):

$$M = i_M + aX + e_M. \quad (1)$$

$$Y = i_Y + c_1X + c_2X^2 + b_1M + b_2M^2 + e_Y. \quad (2)$$

To test the mediation hypothesis, we employed the approach described by Hayes and Preacher (2010), which is specifically designed for nonlinear mediation. In our model, path a is linear while path b is quadratic. Consequently, the indirect effect must be computed according to the following formula: $\theta = a(b_1 + 2b_2[i_M + aX])$ (see Hayes and Preacher 2010, 633). As the formula shows, the indirect effect is not constant as in traditional linear mediation but depends on the value of the predictor X . In other words, the mediating effect of LMX depends on the level of TFL. Because the indirect effect is not constant, in this approach, the indirect effect is known as the instantaneous indirect effect (Hayes and Preacher 2010). The instantaneous indirect effect is the mediating effect of the mediator (LMX) at a specific value of the predictor (TFL). Our analysis of instantaneous indirect effects allows us to understand the relationship between TFL and exhaustion by identifying levels of TFL at which LMX acts as a mediator.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics. We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of TFL, LMX, and emotional exhaustion to assess the quality of our measures. The analysis yielded a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2 [594] = 27.786, p < .01$, confirmatory fit index [CFI] = .965, root mean square of approximation [RMSEA] = .074, standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .056) significantly better than those of the alternative measurement models ($p \Delta\chi^2 < .01$).

Next, we investigated whether the participants' responses are related to their precincts. A one-way analysis of the variance in the two outcome variables reveals that a significant amount of variance can be explained by differences between precincts for emotional exhaustion ($F[34,771] = 1.657, p < .05$, intraclass correlation [ICC] = .028) and LMX ($F[34,771] = 1.534, p < .05$, ICC = .021). The ICC values are very low, meaning that using a multilevel framework did not result in substantial improvements in the non-multilevel analyses (Bliese 2000).

Main analyses

We first tested the relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion. For our first model, we entered the control variables (age, gender, and seniority) as predictor variables (Model 1a). For our second model, we entered TFL and the squared term for TFL as predictor variables (Model 1b). In both models, the dependent variable is emotional exhaustion. **Table 2** reports the estimates of both models. **Figure 1** (Panel A) reports the plot of the relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion while controlling for age, gender, and seniority.

Model 2b explains significantly more variance than Model 2a ($\Delta F = 14.05, p < .001$). Consistent with the hypothesized U-shaped curvilinear relationship, the squared term for TFL is positive and significant ($B = .090, p < .01$). The linear term is also significant ($B = -.236, p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of TFL negatively relate to emotional exhaustion, but only to the point at which there is no additional benefit of more TFL.

We then tested the mediation hypothesis by including TFL (X), LMX (M), and emotional exhaustion (Y). Prior to testing the mediation hypothesis, we ran regression analyses to investigate (1) the hypothesized linear relationship between the predictor (TFL) and the mediator (LMX) and (2) the hypothesized U-shaped curvilinear relationship between the mediator (LMX) and the outcome (emotional exhaustion) while controlling for TFL. In both analyses, we controlled for age, gender, and seniority.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, alphas, and correlations.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	37.30	7.39	-					
2. Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male)	.92	.27	.12	-				
3. Seniority	14.66	7.81	.93	.11	-			
4. Transformational Leadership (TFL)	2.34	.75	-.13	.04	-.14	(.94)		
5. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)	2.66	1.13	-.12	.04	-.13	.63	(.96)	
6. Emotional Exhaustion	2.44	.90	.01	.00	.01	-.10	-.22	(.90)

N = 806. SD = Standard deviation. Correlations of $>.06$ are significant at $p = .05$. Reliabilities are shown in parentheses on the diagonal.

Table 2. Estimates of models predicting emotional exhaustion.

	Emotional exhaustion			
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 1 c	95% Confidence Interval
Step 1. Control variables				
Age	-.002	-.005	-.002	[-.027;.022]
Gender	-.007	.015	.032	[-.245;.310]
Seniority	.004	.005	.002	[-.024;.028]
Step 2. Total effects of TFL				
TFL		-.236***	-.047	[-.151;.056]
Squared TFL		.090**	.004	[-.088;.096]
Step 3. Direct effects of LMX				
LMX			-.157***	[-.244; -.069]
Squared LMX			.087*	[.005;.170]
Overall F	.07	5.66	7.46	
R ²	.03	.06	.08	
ΔF		14.05***	11.61***	
ΔR ²		.03	.03	

N = 806. TFL = Transformational leadership; LMX = Leader-member exchange. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Figure 1. Graphic representation of the relationships between transformational leadership and emotional exhaustion (Panel A), transformational leadership and LMX (Panel B), and LMX and emotional exhaustion (Panel C).

Table 3. Estimates of models predicting leader-member exchange (LMX).

	LMX		
	Model 2a	Model 2b	95% Confidence Interval
<i>Step 1. Control variables</i>			
Age	-.001	.009	[-.009;.026]
Gender	.213	.071	[-.112;.256]
Seniority	-.012	-.012	[-.029;.005]
<i>Step 2. Total effect of TFL</i>			
TFL		1.037	[.978; 1.096]
Overall F	4.76	305.87	
R ²	.04	.61	
ΔF		1188.34***	
ΔR ²		.57	

N = 806. TFL = Transformational leadership; LMX = Leader-member exchange. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

We entered the control variables (age, gender, and seniority) as predictors of LMX (Model 2a). Next, we entered TFL as a predictor (Model 2b). Table 3 reports the estimates of Models 2a and 2b. Model 2b explains significantly more variance than Model 2a ($\Delta F = 1188.34$, $p < .001$). Consistent with our hypothesis, the association

between TFL and LMX is positive and significant ($B = 1.040, p < .001$). **Figure 1** (Panel B) shows the linear relationship between TFL and LMX.

Table 2 (Model 1 c) reports the results of the analysis involving the mediator (LMX) and outcome (emotional exhaustion) while controlling for TFL; **Figure 1** (Panel C) shows the representation. Model 1 c explains significantly more variance than Model 1b ($\Delta F = 11.61, p < .001$). Consistent with our expectations, the squared term for LMX is positive and significant ($B = .087, p < .05$). The linear term is also significant ($B = -.157, p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of LMX negatively relate to emotional exhaustion but only to the point at which there is no additional benefit of more LMX. In this model, TFL and its squared term are no longer significant, which is in line with our mediation hypothesis.

We then tested the mediation hypothesis by computing instantaneous indirect relationships for various levels of TFL. **Figure 2** shows a plot of instantaneous indirect relationships against TFL together with their 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

As **Figure 2** shows, combining the linear path a and the quadratic path b yields a linear curve for the instantaneous indirect relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion through LMX. For low levels of TFL, the instantaneous indirect relationship is significantly negative. The absolute value of the instantaneous indirect relationship decreases as TFL increases and becomes non-significant for high levels of TFL (95% CIs include 0).

Our analysis of the instantaneous indirect effect allows us to better understand the curvilinear relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion. Note that we found a negative relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion, but only to the point at which there is no additional benefit of more TFL (Model 1). In calculating instantaneous indirect effects, we find that at low levels of TFL, the relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion is mediated by LMX. In other words, at low levels of TFL,

Figure 2. Instantaneous indirect mediation effect of transformational leadership on emotional exhaustion via LMX as a function of transformational leadership.

TFL negatively relates to emotional exhaustion, as more TFL leads to more LMX, which in turn leads to less exhaustion.

The situation is very different at high levels of TFL. The relationship between TFL and exhaustion weakens and even starts to reverse as TFL increases. Our analysis of instantaneous indirect effects reveals that at higher levels of TFL, LMX reaches a level at which it no longer contributes to exhaustion. Consequently, at high levels of TFL, the instantaneous indirect effect becomes non-significant, and there is no relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion.

Discussion

Our research aims to contribute to current understanding of leadership and exhaustion in public organizations. Previous theoretical perspectives and empirical works argue for linear relationships, but we challenge this conventional wisdom by postulating the presence of a curvilinear (i.e. U-shaped) relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion through LMX among French police officers. According to the TMGT framework (Pierce and Aguinis 2013) and a framework that integrates the theories of COR (Hobfoll 1989) and SET (Blau 1964), our study suggests that the relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion through the mediation of LMX is more likely to be curvilinear.

Consistent with COR assumptions and previous work (e.g. Harms et al. 2017), we propose that TFL may act as a contextual resource that allows followers to deploy their own resources more effectively and thereby reduce their levels of emotional exhaustion. However, our results suggest that the negative effect of TFL on emotional exhaustion may not be perfectly linear; it becomes less and less pronounced. It seems that TFL reduces emotional exhaustion only to a point (i.e. inflection point) at which there are no benefits of more TFL. Beyond this inflection point, when TFL increases from moderate to high, levels of emotional exhaustion are more likely to increase. Our results suggest that this counterintuitive finding can be attributed to the fact that LMX as a mediator may reach a level at which it no longer reduces emotional exhaustion.

Specifically, at low to moderate TFL levels, LMX may serve as both a resource and a reservoir of resources that may be drawn on as predicted by role theory (Liden, Sparrowe, and Wayne 1997) such that it reduces exhaustion. Additionally, TFL enhances LMX by strengthening the reciprocation norm (through a social exchange mechanism), which motivates followers to reciprocate (Ng 2017; Carnevale et al. 2020). However, our results suggest that beyond the inflection point, when TFL increases from moderate to high, the reciprocation norm induced by LMX may lead to exhaustion. Thus, beyond this point, the relationship between LMX quality and emotional exhaustion is more likely to become positive due to permanently expanded obligations (i.e. social exchange rationale), resulting in a curvilinear relationship. Overall our results suggest that below a certain level, TFL has motivating but also draining aspects according to the quality of relationships with leaders.

Theoretical contributions

We contribute to TFL research by theoretically explaining how (i.e. through LMX) and when (i.e. through curvilinear relationships) TFL is most likely to be associated with

police officers' emotional exhaustion. Our research in turn identifies a new avenue for leadership research in public organizations and law enforcement by revealing some unintended effects of TFL. Followers may respond to highly transformational leaders with more exhaustion. In addition to focusing on constructive forms of leadership, prior literature has explored the negative effects or 'dark side' of leadership (Conger 1990) by using terms such as 'destructive,' 'toxic,' 'derailed,' 'tyrannical,' or 'abusive' to describe 'poor' leader behaviours (e.g. harassment and mistreatment of subordinates) (see Schyns and Schilling 2013 for a meta-analysis overview of destructive leadership; Mackey et al. 2017 for a meta-analysis overview of abusive supervision). In the TFL literature, the term 'pseudo-transformational leadership' describes cases in which leaders' intentions or motives explain the negative effects of TFL behaviours (Bass, Avolio, and Atwater 1996). Pseudo-transformational leadership differs from TFL, as it is manifested from a combination of TFL behaviours (i.e. low idealized influence and high inspirational motivation (Barling, Christie, and Turner 2008)). Other authors propose that TFL changes the relationship between leaders and followers from a two-way exchange to a one-way process of domination that has inherently negative effects (Collinson, Smolović Jones, and Grint 2017). By focusing on constructive leadership, we introduce another approach to understanding the potentially negative effects of TFL as a result of the TMGT effect; that is, leaders' intentions, motivations, or dispositions (Dasborough and Ashkanasy 2002) are not necessarily the cause of harmful effects (i.e. transformational leaders '*doing it wrong*'). Rather, such effects may be the result of the core component of leadership and its curvilinear nature.

Several scholars acknowledge that leadership is a complex phenomenon and call for explorations of the U-shaped relationships between leadership and employee outcomes (Crosby and Bryson 2018; Vergauwe et al. 2018). Despite the popularity of TFL among practitioners and public management scholars (Ospina 2017), to our knowledge, this is the first study to empirically test the curvilinear effects of TFL on followers' exhaustion. Our results support the idea that TFL has motivating but also draining aspects at below and above a certain level. The observed curvilinear outcomes may explain why previous studies uncover inconsistent and inconclusive effects when studying the relationship between TFL and stress (Arnold et al. 2015).

Although TFL has been shown to influence employee wellbeing through meaningfulness of work, trust in leaders, self-efficacy, or striving (Arnold et al. 2007; Liu, Siu, and Shi 2010; Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies 2018), this study also demonstrates that LMX is an important mechanism by which TFL affects well-being. This result reinforces Ng's (2017) recent work by confirming that LMX is the most proximal antecedent of TFL and is an important mechanism for both performance outcomes and well-being. We find evidence of full mediation, suggesting that the curvilinear relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion stems from social exchange components. Furthermore, our findings support the few studies that find curvilinear effects of LMX on workplace stress outcomes (Harris, Kacmar, and Witt 2005; Harris and Kacmar 2006; Sui et al. 2016).

We provide a more refined theoretical framework for understanding the curvilinear relationship between leadership and emotional exhaustion in public organizations by combining the theoretical lenses of COR theory (Hobfoll 1989) and SET (Blau 1964). We answer various calls from public management scholars to develop and test leadership theory with an emphasis on causality and theory building (Ospina 2017; Crosby and Bryson 2018; Hartley 2018).

Finally, though substantial work examines the effects of TFL on followers' attitudes and behaviours, it tends to focus on leaders' active roles and attributes. A follower-centric approach devoted to the 'romance of leadership' (Meindl 1995) prompted Shamir (2007) to suggest that scholars 'reverse the lens' by studying followers' needs, values, wants, and preferences with regard to their perceptions of and reactions to different leadership styles and levels. Our findings of the curvilinear effects of TFL on emotional exhaustion through LMX suggest that TFL and its positive or negative consequences may be the result of followers' perceptions and feelings of adequacy related to their pre-existing and evolving needs. This notion not only supports the literature on the importance of followers' basic need fulfilment through leadership processes (Kovjanic et al. 2012) but also confirms evidence on the adequacy of these needs and on their alignment with leadership styles, amounts, and levels (de Vries, Roe, and Taillieu 2002).

Practical contributions

Scholars often frame leadership constructs as 'positive' or 'desirable' in any and all amounts and levels (Pierce and Aguinis 2013) while neglecting the dynamism of the modern workplace (Cavarretta et al. 2015). Our results suggest that leadership behaviours traditionally regarded as beneficial (i.e. TFL and LMX) can have detrimental effects on the emotional exhaustion of public employees when practiced at extraordinary levels. In other words, too little or too much TFL or LMX can be dysfunctional. By identifying counter-theoretical effects of TFL on emotional exhaustion via LMX, we can identify best leadership practices for public organizations.

First, there is a need to more thoroughly consider the impact of leadership practices on public servants' work outcomes from various perspectives such as health issues. Because TFL and LMX have been associated with positive performance outcomes, public managers have been heavily influenced by the notion that such behaviours will necessarily result in outcomes that are systematically more desirable (Ospina 2017; Crosby and Bryson 2018). However, our findings suggest that leaders who engage in excessive TFL or LMX behaviours with their followers can generate emotional exhaustion among these followers. Public managers should be aware of the potentially negative effects of leadership (as well as their positive effects of course).

Second, our findings indicate that moderate levels of TFL and LMX are preferable. While it is difficult to draw a precise line between 'just enough' and 'too much' of certain leadership behaviours, we identify a few factors that can influence positive leadership effectiveness in public organizations. We recommend that police managers maintain a balanced approach when engaging in TFL behaviours towards their followers. For those whose TFL may be above optimal, coaching and development programmes aimed at managing potential operational weaknesses, enhancing self-awareness, and encouraging self-regulation can be useful (Kark, Van Dijk, and Vashdi 2018). Highly transformational leaders can also benefit from receiving feedback from their co-workers on their effectiveness, revealing any potential gaps between their perceptions and the perceptions of others. In contrast, coaching programs for leaders low on transformational behaviours may focus more on encouraging their strategic actions in police stations.

More generally, instead of providing 'one-size-fits-all' advice, we encourage public leaders to develop their own best practices by continuously taking the pulse of their

teams and establishing the extent to which their subordinates need more or less transformational action. This implication is in line with recent work by Lee et al. (2019), who empirically demonstrate the importance of consistency in performance-related relationships (i.e. viewing relationships with followers in terms of both quality and a lack of ambiguity). Furthermore, our work can help public managers understand why TFL interventions intended to have positive effects may evoke negative effects. For example, providing TFL behavioural training to work unit leaders may produce emotional exhaustion in followers with strong LMX relationships with trained leaders.

Accordingly, we propose several ways to mitigate police officers' experiences of emotional exhaustion (TFL training, evaluation of supervisors' TFL as part of annual developmental assessments, 360° feedback (see Piccolo and Colquitt 2006), and the use of instruments such as Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Form 5X-Short (Bass and Bass 2008)) to tailor levels of transformational action to the needs of subordinates. To differentiate and adapt their levels of transformational action, managers should identify their employees' needs and characteristics. By ensuring that leaders express TFL behaviours at moderate levels, organizations can better protect police officers' mental health and reduce their levels of job stress.

Our findings also reveal the importance of establishing quality relationships between leaders and followers. Public organizations might consider reassigning leaders or followers to break up 'toxic' or 'overly friendly' dyads. Therefore, our results suggest that enhancing TFL behaviours in public organizations should also encourage LMX, which might be especially relevant in contexts such as those of law enforcement. This implication is strengthened by research that links LMX to enhanced individual health (see Harms et al. 2017). Public managers can more readily and quickly tailor the quality of the relationships they share with their followers than change their employees' perceptions and psychological attitudes – which are unobservable, subjective, and time-consuming to change. Finally, recent works suggest that leaders are not the only source of social exchange relationships that can develop through horizontal processes within teams (see Banks et al. 2014 for a meta-analysis). Thus, public organizations should develop team practices that create and enhance adequate social exchange relationships among co-workers beyond those initiated by leaders (Lee et al. 2019).

Limitations and research directions

Several limitations to our study reveal new avenues for research. First, our use of self-reported measures leaves our findings vulnerable to single-source bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). While we defend that individuals are in the best position to provide information regarding their experiences of leadership and burnout (see McKee et al. 2018 for a different point of view), future research should try to avoid issues associated with self-ratings by having direct supervisors rate their leadership styles or experiences of burnout or by using ratings from colleagues or family members (Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies 2018). Furthermore, our temporal separation of our predictors from our outcome variable likely to supports the curvilinear relationship and mediation results observed. In addition, single-source variance is not likely to influence interactions and curvilinear effects (Siemens, Roth, and Oliveira 2010). We also rely on solid, well-established theoretical rationales.

Second, we collected our data from a single organization. While this approach helped control for potentially confounding effects across organizations and activities (Hannah et al. 2009), the singular context considered may have also created unique conditions that increased the observed range of leadership constructs (Hällgren, Rouleau, and de Rond 2018). Prior research has shown that leadership in police organizations can affect officers' health and wellness (Burke 2017). This study finds a curvilinear relationship between TFL, LMX, and emotional exhaustion among French police officers. The external validity of these findings depends on how similar the effects of leadership on officers' health are in police organizations in other countries with different institutional and cultural characteristics to the effects found in French police organizations. In interpreting the impact of TFL on emotional exhaustion, one cannot ignore the importance of work contexts. TFL is not independent of work environments (van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013). Organizational variables such as organizational structure may also play an important role here. Context may also be determined by cultural concerns. As we focus on French police officers in this study, the relationships obtained here may be considered unique to the specific structures and cultures involved. However, we believe that high-stress, high-pressure situations are rather typical for the 'normal' leadership contexts of many public organizations (e.g. nursing and firefighting) enhancing the likelihood of finding a too-much-of-a-good-thing effect (de Rond, Rouleau, and Hällgren 2018).

Studies of other settings (e.g. different public organizations and national cultures) would reinforce confidence in the generalizability of our results. Moreover, we used a unidimensional measure of TFL and LMX to capture all transformational behaviours and the exchange relationship. While the use of a composite unidimensional measure of TFL and LMX is consistent with prior research, future research should investigate whether specific dimensions of TFL and LMX might affect the findings reported in this study. Furthermore, recent studies in public management recommend the use of a specific measure of TFL related to public organizations to overcome limitations noted by van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) (see also Jensen et al. 2019 for a complete discussion). However, in line with previous works, we adhere to the original Bass Full Range Leadership Model (and the MLQ) and do not divide the four transformational subscales, as they are intended to form a measure of transformational leadership, which is conceptualized as a driver of change in an organization. Our attempt is also important because the TFL research has been criticized for a lack of clarity as a result of different approaches used by different researchers and for a lack of theoretical justification of the mediating processes tested (van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013).

Third, we did not introduce contextual factors into our analysis of the relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion. Previous research indicates that this relationship is positive or negative depending on specific moderators used such as followers' attributes or organizational contexts (see van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013). For example, in conditions of high levels of environmental uncertainty, the inflection point in the curvilinear association between TFL and exhaustion might occur at higher levels of TFL than it would in conditions of low levels of environmental uncertainty. Contingency approaches to leadership also suggest testing the TMGT effects of TFL while using followers' attributes and needs (i.e. self-determination theory) as moderators.

Another research focus arises from the sequential relationships between TFL, LMX, and emotional exhaustion. Much more explanation is needed about the processes by

which TFL affects public servants. Montano et al.'s (2017) recent meta-analysis shows that burnout mediates the relationship between leadership and job performance. Qin et al. (2014) support the idea that emotional exhaustion is not always detrimental for followers; in specific conditions, it may magnify employees' propensities to engage in prohibitive voice behaviours. It is worth exploring the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in workplace performance outcomes according to a curvilinear framework to determine whether exhaustion is a prerequisite of strong performance when TFL levels are high or when LMX is of high quality.

Conclusion

In this study, we build and test a theoretical model based on COR and SET to explore how, through LMX, TFL may be related to emotional exhaustion. In line with the TMGT framework, our results suggest a U-shaped relationship between TFL and emotional exhaustion as a result of LMX. Our findings clarify how TFL is more likely to be related to exhaustion and highlight the potential detrimental effects of TFL when it goes beyond a tipping point. Much more research applying experimental and nonexperimental designs to different contexts is needed before we can draw any definite conclusions about the complex effects of leadership on employee wellbeing in public organizations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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