



Moral leadership and employee work–family conflict: A moderated mediation model

Lei Yao¹, Ping Li²

¹Business School, Beijing Normal University, People's Republic of China

²Economic Ethics Research Center, Henan University of Economics and Law, People's Republic of China

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We applied conservation of resources theory to propose a moderated mediation model explaining how and when moral leadership influences employees' work–family conflict (WFC). Specifically, we hypothesized that both job clarity and workplace anxiety would mediate the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC, and that trust in supervisor would moderate the indirect effect of moral leadership and WFC through job clarity and workplace anxiety. We collected data from 258 employees of 3 companies in China, and their spouses. The findings indicated that job clarity and workplace anxiety mediated the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC, and that trust in supervisor strengthened the indirect effect through job clarity and workplace anxiety. Theoretical and practical implications of our findings are discussed regarding how and when moral leadership style reduces employees' WFC.

Keywords

moral leadership;
work–family conflict; job
clarity; workplace anxiety;
trust in supervisor;
leadership style

Moral leadership has received increasing attention in practice and in academic fields because scandals involving ethical aspects of organizational operations have been occurring frequently (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Moral leadership has two characteristics that demonstrate the leader's superior personal virtues—acting unselfishly and leading by example (Farh & Cheng, 2000). *Acting unselfishly* means that moral leaders do not use authority to violate employee interests, but instead treat them as equals. *Leading by example* means leaders act as a role model for their employees. Researchers (see, e.g., Ruiz, Ruiz, & Martínez, 2011) have demonstrated the positive impacts (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior) of moral leadership on employees' job attitudes and performance. However, little is known about whether moral leadership affects the employees' family domain through the role that leadership style plays at work, for example, in regard to work–family conflict (WFC). This deserves further research attention because work and family are inseparable domains. Conflict between the demands and needs of family and work has detrimental consequences for individual well-being, family relationship quality, and organizational performance (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Shih, Chiang, & Hsu, 2010). Thus, we focused on how moral leadership impacts on employees' WFC. Researchers have indicated that job characteristics (e.g., job clarity) have a direct effect on WFC (Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011), and that style of leadership can shape employees' perception of their job. Moreover, scholars have explored cognitive and psychological mechanisms, such as psychological empowerment and interactive justice, which underlie the relationship between moral leadership and employees' work attitudes and performance (C. W. Li, Wu, Johnson, & Wu, 2012; Wu, 2012), mainly by referring to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). However, employees' perceptions of job characteristics and emotional experience at work (e.g., workplace anxiety), as potential mechanisms underlying the

CORRESPONDENCE Ping Li, No. 221, New Campus Administration Building, Economic Ethics Research Center, Henan University of Economics and Law, Intersection of Jinshui East Road and East Fourth Ring Road, Zhengzhou, Henan, People's Republic of China. Email: liping_2006@sina.com

relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC, have been underexplored.

We developed a theoretical model to explain the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC, and the underlying mechanisms. According to conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), people strive to acquire, retain, and protect the resources they consider valuable. Those with a larger number of resources are more likely to retain resources and are less susceptible to resource loss (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Moral leadership can be regarded as a valuable resource because it protects the interests of employees (Brown & Treviño, 2006). When employees interact with leaders who maintain morality and transparency, they are likely to understand the expectations of their leaders and learn about how to do their jobs effectively (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008). These positive interactions may assist them with clarifying job requirements and give them a sense of job control; thus, they will be more likely to put their time and energy into work, which can help to reduce their job-related anxiety (Bliese & Castro, 2000; Griffin, Greiner, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2007). *Workplace anxiety* is defined as a feeling of tension in completing a task, which depletes employees' resources and brings much strain (McCarthy, Trougakos, & Cheng, 2016). We proposed that moral leadership may increase employees' perceived job clarity and mitigate their workplace anxiety, ultimately reducing their WFC.

We also extended COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) by exploring the moderating effect of trust in supervisor on the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC. *Trust in supervisor* (TIS) represents employees' belief that their leaders are trustworthy (Wu, Huang, Li, & Liu, 2012), and increases the likelihood of employees being willing to accept their leaders' words and behavior (Conchie & Donald, 2009). We adopted TIS in our research model because employees with high TIS tend to communicate better with their supervisor and have better access to work resources (A. N. Li & Tan, 2013), which reduces the employees' job ambiguity and then decreases their workplace anxiety. Therefore, we argued that employees' TIS may strengthen the relationship between moral leadership and employees' perceived job clarity, which will, in turn, affect employees' workplace anxiety and WFC.

In sum, we applied COR theory to examine the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC by uncovering the cognitive mechanism of job clarity and the emotional mechanism of workplace anxiety. This provides a new perspective to explore the relationship between leadership and employees' WFC (Tang, Kwan, Zhang, & Zhu, 2016). In addition, we suggested that employees with high TIS will be more likely to receive more job resources that will further reduce job ambiguity, such that they experience less workplace anxiety and, ultimately, have lower WFC (see Figure 1).

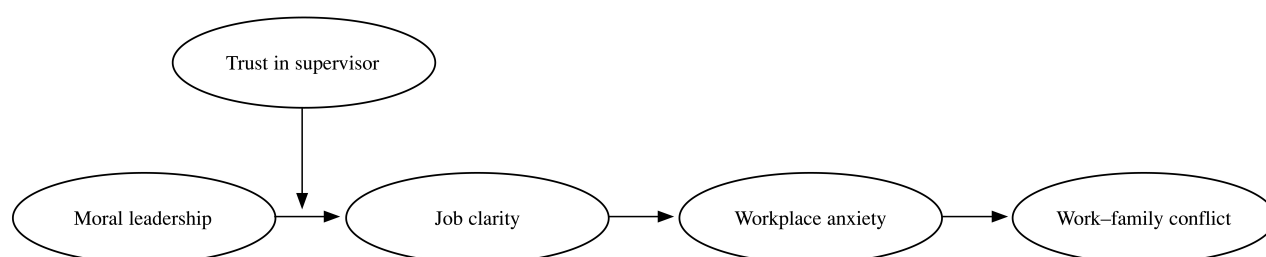


Figure 1. Research framework.

Hypothesis Development

Moral leadership shares some common features with ethical leadership, such as “integrity, role modeling, concern for others, and ethical decision making” (Gu, Tang, & Jiang, 2015, p. 516). Researchers have also uncovered the difference between these two types of leadership: In ethical leadership the emphasis is on

moral management, that is, influencing employees to behave ethically (Brown & Treviño, 2006), whereas in moral leadership leading by personal virtues is highlighted (Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2014). In the Chinese business context, moral leadership plays an important role because employees expect their leaders to display moral behavior to protect employees' interests (Wu et al., 2012).

We explored the mechanisms underlying the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC. In COR theory, Hobfoll (1989, 2001) depicts the important role of *individual resources*, referring to tangible or intangible resources that an individual values (e.g., job control), in dealing with strain. Having resources may reduce individuals' strain and help them to conserve these resources in the future. Interactions with moral leaders who demonstrate self-discipline and unselfishness may encourage employees to communicate with their leaders openly and frequently (Chan, 2014; Chen et al., 2014), increasing the likelihood of their obtaining the resource of greater job clarity (Gong, Wang, Huang, & Cheung, 2017). Thus, those employees who work with moral leaders may have a clear and accurate understanding of their job roles, which helps to promote their intrinsic motivation and job control (Gong et al., 2017; Kauppila, 2018), and further decrease their feeling of anxiety about the job (McCarthy et al., 2016). Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between moral leadership and employees' workplace anxiety will be mediated by job clarity.

As described above, the greater the job clarity that employees perceive, the less workplace anxiety they will feel. Anxiety aroused in the workplace may extend to the family domain, leading to cognitive interference that draws the individual's attention and effort away from their family (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007); for example, an individual who stays at home may worry about his/her job. Similarly, when employees feel low anxiety in the workplace, they will experience low strain and low WFC. Therefore, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between job clarity and employees' work–family conflict will be mediated by employees' workplace anxiety.

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between moral leadership and employees' work–family conflict will be mediated sequentially by job clarity and then by employees' workplace anxiety.

Employees with high TIS tend to seek suggestions from their leaders, obtain more job information (i.e., job standards, leader expectations), and increase their regulated behavior. Consequently, these employees may experience less anxiety at work and transfer less strain to their family. In contrast, employees with low TIS are unlikely to seek support from their supervisors; thus, they tend to obtain less job information and may experience increased job ambiguity. These employees, therefore, have less directed behavior and find it more difficult to meet their job requirements, resulting in greater work anxiety and strain, which then transfer to the family context. Thus, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4a: Trust in supervisor will positively moderate the relationship between moral leadership and job clarity.

Hypothesis 4b: Trust in supervisor will moderate the indirect effect of moral leadership on employees' work–family conflict through job clarity and workplace anxiety, such that the indirect effect will be weaker when employees' trust in supervisor is low rather than high.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We collected data from staff of three information technology companies in Northern China. To increase the generalizability of our theoretical model across job types, we recruited individuals employed in a broad cross-section of jobs, including production, marketing and sales, engineering, research and development, administrative support, and logistics. The participants completed the survey on a voluntary basis in their workplace, took a packet back home for their spouse to complete the relevant section, and handed both sets of responses in at their workplace after 4 days.

We obtained 268 matched questionnaires from employees and their spouses (response rate = 73.6%). After eliminating 10 incomplete pairs of questionnaires, we had 258 matched forms for analysis. The average age of the participants was 36.5 years ($SD = 1.28$, range = 21–51 years); 60.6% were men and 36.4% were women; and 80% of the couples had at least one child. In regard to education level, 52.1% held a bachelor's degree, 23.4% held an associate degree, 14.3% held a master's degree or doctorate, and 10.2% held a high school diploma. In terms of job type, 32.9% worked in logistics, 20.0% in administrative support, 16.3% in production, 12.1% in marketing and sales, 10.4% in research and development, and 8.3% in engineering.

Measures

Responses were made on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). The moral leadership scale was initially written in Chinese. All other measures were translated into Chinese by one associate professor and three doctoral students working in the fields of organizational behavior and English, by following the translation–back-translation procedure recommended by Brislin (1986). We used scales with established reliability and validity.

Work–family conflict. Participants' spouses rated WFC using five items from Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian (1996). A sample item is “The demands of my spouse's work interfere with my home and family life.”

Moral leadership. We measured moral leadership with the nine-item subscale from the Paternalistic Leadership Scale by Cheng, Chou, and Farh (2000). A sample item is “My supervisor does not take advantage of me for personal gain.”

Role clarity. We measured role clarity with six items from Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970). A sample item is “I know exactly what is expected of me in my job.”

Workplace anxiety. We measured workplace anxiety with eight items from McCarthy et al. (2016). A sample item is “I worry that I will not be able to successfully manage the demands of my job.”

Control variables. We controlled for individual demographic variables, including age, gender, education level, number of children, and job type, to reduce their potential impact on WFC (Carr, Boyar, & Gregory, 2008; Shockley, Shen, DeNunzio, Arvan, & Knudsen, 2017).

Results

The data were analyzed by using structural equation modeling in Mplus 7. To reduce parameter estimation bias caused by a large number of measured items and small sample size, we parceled moral leadership into five items, workplace anxiety and TIS into four items each, and job clarity and WFC into three items each (Alhija & Wisenbaker, 2006; Bandalos, 2002).

Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Confirmatory factor analysis results (see Table 1) indicate that the single-factor model had a significantly poorer fit than the other four alternative models, especially compared with the five-factor model. Thus, common method variance was not a concern in this study, and all five factors had acceptable discriminant and convergent validity.

Table 1. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

		χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf
Baseline model	Five factors	247.16	142	1.74	.06	.98	.97	.05		
Model 1	Four factors: Role clarity and workplace anxiety were combined into one factor	704.15	146	4.82	.13	.87	.84	.12	456.99***	4
Model 2	Three factors: Moral leadership, role clarity, and workplace anxiety were combined into one factor	1577.09	149	10.58	.20	.66	.61	.19	1329.92***	7
Model 3	Two factors: Moral leadership, role clarity, workplace anxiety, and WFC were combined into one factor	2168.39	151	14.36	.24	.52	.46	.21	1921.23***	9
Model 4	One factor: All variables were combined into one factor	2465.55	152	16.22	0.26	.45	.38	.22	2218.38***	10

Note. $N = 258$. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, CFI = comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker–Lewis index, SRMR = standardized root mean square residual, WFC = work–family conflict.

*** $p < .001$.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas, and correlation matrix for the variables. Moral leadership was positively correlated with job clarity, job clarity was negatively correlated with workplace anxiety, and workplace anxiety was positively correlated with WFC.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Moral leadership	4.09	1.02	(.95)				
2. Job clarity	4.43	0.70	.24***	(.94)			
3. Workplace anxiety	3.41	0.90	.02	-.23***	(.90)		
4. WFC	3.34	0.95	-.02	-.05	.39***	(.93)	
5. TIS	4.01	0.84	.71***	.28***	-.03	-.02	(.91)

Note. $N = 258$. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients appear on the diagonal in parentheses. WFC = work–family conflict, TIS = trust in supervisor.

*** $p < .001$.

Structural Equation Modeling Analysis

We tested four models to examine the hypotheses: Model 1 (baseline model) represented all of the hypothesized relationships, including the direct paths from moral leadership to employees' perceived job clarity, workplace anxiety, and WFC, and from job clarity to employees' workplace anxiety and WFC. Using the baseline model, we constructed three nested models: Models 2, 3, and 4. In Model 2 we eliminated the direct path from moral leadership to employees' workplace anxiety; thus, job clarity was a full mediator of the relationship between moral leadership and employees' workplace anxiety. In Model 3 we eliminated the direct paths from job clarity to employees' WFC; thus, employees' workplace anxiety was a full mediator of the relationship between job clarity and employees' WFC. In Model 4 both job clarity and employees'

workplace anxiety were full mediators of the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC. The chi-square differences were not significant between Model 1 and Models 2, 3, or 4. On the basis of the indices of chi square (χ^2), degrees of freedom (df), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), all had a good fit to the data, Model 1: $\chi^2 = 195.87$, $df = 144$, RMSEA = .041, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, SRMR = .04; Model 2: $\chi^2 = 196.07$, $df = 145$, RMSEA = .040, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, SRMR = .04; Model 3: $\chi^2 = 195.87$, $df = 144$, RMSEA = .041, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, SRMR = .04; Model 4: $\chi^2 = 198.48$, $df = 147$, RMSEA = .040, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, SRMR = .04. On the principle of model parsimony, we chose Model 4 for hypothesis testing.

Results presented in Table 3 indicate that moral leadership was positively related to job clarity, and job clarity was negatively related to workplace anxiety. Job clarity mediated the relationship between moral leadership and employees' workplace anxiety, $\beta = -.05$, $p < .05$; bias-corrected bootstrapping confidence interval (CI) of 95% [-.113, -.014], excluding zero, supporting Hypothesis 1. In addition, employees' workplace anxiety was positively related to their WFC, and employees' workplace anxiety mediated the relationship between job clarity and employees' WFC, $\beta = -.06$, $p < .05$; bias-corrected bootstrapping 95% CI [-.186, -.023], excluding zero, supporting Hypothesis 2. Moreover, job clarity and workplace anxiety mediated the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC, $\beta = -.02$, $p < .05$; bias-corrected bootstrapping 95% CI [-.045, -.005], excluding zero, supporting Hypothesis 3.

We tested the moderation effect posited in Hypothesis 4a by building Model 5. The results show that TIS significantly moderated the relationship between moral leadership and job clarity. We plotted two simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the mean of TIS (Aiken & West, 1991). The relationship between moral leadership and job clarity was positive and was stronger when TIS was high than when it was low (see Figure 2), supporting Hypothesis 4a.

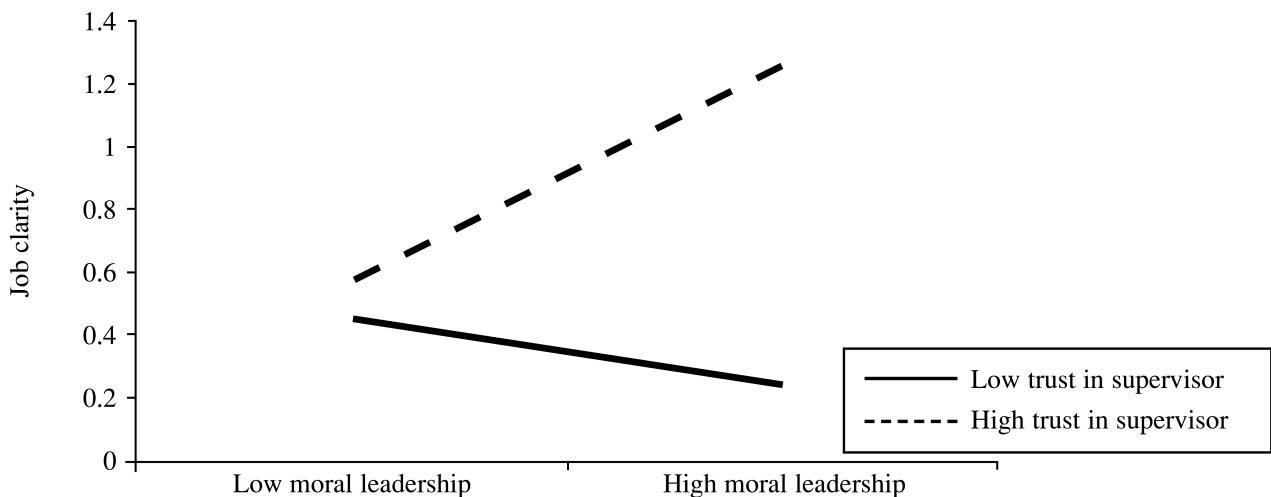


Figure 2. Employees' trust in supervisor as a moderator of the relationship between moral leadership and job clarity.

Table 3. Mplus Analysis Results

Variable	Job clarity		Workplace anxiety		WFC	
Model 4						
Intercept	.79		-.72		-1.10	
Gender	.07	(.09)	.25*	(.12)	.16	(.12)
Parental status	-.12	(.11)	.04	(.15)	.09	(.15)
Age	.11**	(.04)	-.18**	(.05)	.02	(.05)
Education level	.18**	(.06)	-.14†	(.08)	-.21	(.08)
Job type	.02	(.03)	-.01	(.04)	.05	(.04)
Moral leadership	.19***	(.05)				
Job clarity			-.26**	(.10)		
Workplace anxiety					.34***	(.07)
R ²	.16**		.15**		.17**	
Model 5						
Intercept	.64					
Gender	-.03	(.08)				
Parental status	-.08	(.10)				
Age	.10	(.03)				
Education level	.14	(.03)				
Job type	.004	(.02)				
Moral leadership	.11	(.07)				
TIS	.28**	(.10)				
Moral leadership × TIS	.23***	(.06)				
R ²	.31***					
Model 6						
Intercept	4.44		3.39		3.34	
Gender	-.02	(.09)	.27	(.12)	.15	(.12)
Parental status	-.09	(.11)	.05	(.15)	.11	(.15)
Age	.11**	(.04)	-.16**	(.05)	.01	(.05)
Education level	.17**	(.06)	-.11	(.07)	-.23	(.07)
Job type	.01	(.03)	.002	(.03)	-.07	(.04)
Moral leadership	.11†	(.06)	-.02	(.08)	-.05	(.08)
Job clarity			-.21	(.09)	.10	(.09)
Workplace anxiety					.35***	(.07)
TIS	.22**	(.07)	-.03	(.10)	.02	(.10)
Moral leadership × TIS	.15***	(.04)	-.11*	(.05)	.02	(.05)
R ²	.23***		.16**		.18***	

Note. Standardized model results are presented. $N = 258$. WFC = work–family conflict, TIS = trust in supervisor. Column outside parentheses is the unstandardized regression coefficient, column in parentheses is the standard error.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

We applied the Bayesian method (Wang & Preacher, 2015) of conducting a moderated mediation analysis to estimate the interaction parameters of the relationship posited in Hypothesis 4b by building Model 6. Results show that the indirect relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC through the mediator of job clarity and workplace anxiety was significant for employees with a high level of TIS, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .068$; bias-corrected bootstrapping 95% CI [-0.049, -.005], excluding zero; but was not significant for employees with a low level of TIS, $\beta = .001$, $p > .05$; bias-corrected bootstrapping 95% CI [-0.010, .016], including zero. The difference between these conditional indirect effects was marginally significant, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .055$; bias-corrected bootstrapping 95% CI [-0.051, -.003], excluding zero, suggesting that the mediating effect of job clarity and workplace anxiety was indeed stronger when TIS was high versus low, supporting Hypothesis 4b.

Discussion

Although moral leadership has received increasing scholarly attention in the past few years, empirical research on the topic remains limited (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Further, much of the research conducted has been focused on the work domain, such that the relationship between moral leadership and employees' family domain has seldom been considered. We followed the assumption that work and family are inseparable and examined the impact of moral leadership on employees' family domain by illuminating its relationship with employees' perception of job characteristics, workplace anxiety, and WFC in a Chinese context. Our results were as follows: (a) moral leadership decreased employees' workplace anxiety by increasing job clarity; (b) employees' perceived job clarity decreased their WFC by reducing their workplace anxiety; (c) moral leadership increased employees' job clarity, which decreased their workplace anxiety resulting in reduced WFC; and (d) when employees with high TIS interacted with moral leaders, they perceived greater job clarity, felt less anxiety, and experienced less WFC.

Theoretical Implications

Our study makes several theoretical contributions. First, we applied COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) to develop a conceptual framework explaining how moral leadership affects employees' family domain. In previous studies on moral leadership the focus was mainly on work behavior, such as helping behavior and deviant behavior (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & de Hoogh, 2013; Newman, Allen, & Miao, 2015) and job performance (Piccolo, Greenbaum, den Hartog, & Folger, 2010). Although Chughtai, Byrne, and Flood (2015) explored the relationship between moral leadership and employee well-being, they focused on work engagement and emotional exhaustion in the workplace, and the family domain was not involved. Second, our findings advance research on the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC by uncovering the mediating roles of the cognitive pathway of job clarity and the emotional pathway of workplace anxiety. Although job characteristics are sometimes regarded as an objective indicator (Piccolo et al., 2010), we suggested that job clarity would be impacted on by moral leadership, and our findings supporting this proposal deepen understanding of the effects of moral leadership on employees. Third, we have expanded understanding of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) in a leadership context. The more resources one possesses, the fewer resources one loses, which is termed a gain spiral. Although the gain spiral has been described in COR theory, it has seldom been examined in empirical research (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Our results show that the resources provided to employees by moral leaders can help to buffer the negative consequences of workplace anxiety on employees' WFC through the mediator of role clarity. Fourth, we integrated employees' TIS to examine the boundary conditions between moral leadership and employees' WFC. We used employees' TIS as a critical moderator in strengthening the relationship between moral leadership and employees' perceived job clarity. The results indicate that moral leadership had a stronger effect on perceived job clarity, workplace anxiety, and WFC for employees with high (vs. low) TIS.

Managerial Implications

This study also has practical implications for employees who experience WFC. First, given that moral leadership reduces employees' WFC, we suggest that moral values and culture should be cultivated in organizations, moral standards should be established, and moral behaviors rewarded. Second, moral leadership may be developed in organizations by training leaders to display personal integrity, use their authority to promote collective interests, treat employees fairly, and accept responsibilities (Farh & Cheng, 2000). These practices will encourage employees to obtain more job resources, improve their perception of job clarity, and reduce their workplace anxiety, mitigating their WFC. Third, as employees with high TIS are more likely to seek and accept their leaders' influence than are employees with low TIS, high TIS may strengthen the effects of moral leadership on the employees' WFC. Our research findings suggest that use of the moral leadership style may enhance the trust of employees and this, in turn, can increase the leader's management effectiveness.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research has some limitations. First, our sample comprised only Chinese employees, which may limit the generalizability of our results to other cultural contexts. Second, although we collected data from employees and their spouses, common method variance may exist because of the short time interval between the collection of data from these two sources. In addition, we tested the hypotheses with a cross-sectional research design, which makes it difficult to determine the causal relationships between the examined variables (Chen et al., 2014). We suggest that future researchers test the relationship between job clarity and workplace anxiety using a longitudinal design.

Conclusion

Drawing on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), we delineated the mechanism of the moderating effects of job clarity and workplace anxiety on the relationship between moral leadership and employees' WFC. Our results provide greater understanding of how moral leadership impacts on employees' WFC. We also found that TIS can help employees to obtain more job resources, thereby decreasing their job ambiguity, reducing their workplace anxiety, and ultimately decreasing their WFC.

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