Understanding how leaders’ humility promotes followers’ emotions and ethical behaviors: Workplace spirituality as a mediator

Saima Naseer, Fauzia Syed, Shazia Nauman, Tasneem Fatima, Ifrah Jameel & Namra Riaz

To cite this article: Saima Naseer, Fauzia Syed, Shazia Nauman, Tasneem Fatima, Ifrah Jameel & Namra Riaz (2019): Understanding how leaders’ humility promotes followers’ emotions and ethical behaviors: Workplace spirituality as a mediator, The Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2019.1615103

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2019.1615103

Published online: 09 May 2019.
Understanding how leaders’ humility promotes followers’ emotions and ethical behaviors: Workplace spirituality as a mediator

Saima Naseer, Fauzia Syed, Shazia Nauman, Tasneem Fatima, Ifrah Jameel and Namra Riaz

Faculty of Management Sciences, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

We propose a meditational model that explains why and how leaders’ humility manifests into followers’ empathy, gratitude, and ethical behaviors. Building on social information-processing theory (SIP), we hypothesize that, when a leader has a high level of humility, his or her followers receive signals that increase perceptions of workplace spirituality, which fosters an environment of ethical behavior, empathy, and gratitude. We collected time-lagged survey data (three time intervals, each a month apart) from employees and their colleagues (n = 286) in nine organizations in Pakistan’s telecom, education, and industrial sectors. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), we show that a leader’s humility predicts his or her employees’ ethical behaviors, empathy, and gratitude. Moreover, perceptions of workplace spirituality mediated the time-lagged effects of a leader’s humility on his or her followers’ ethical behaviors, empathy, and gratitude. Our findings largely support our theoretical foundations that indicate that a leader’s humility has important implications for his or her followers’ positive emotions and behaviors through a unique process involving workplace spirituality.

Introduction

Leaders have been characterized as people who possess heroic qualities, hold supreme powers, and protect the people below them (Collins, 2001; Khurana, 2002). For many centuries, researchers and practitioners in the leadership domain have glorified leaders, although an increasing trend in recent years has been toward the notion of humility in leadership (Exline & Geyer, 2004). In coining the term ‘level-5 leadership,’ Collins (2001) proposed that taking companies from being simply ‘good’ to ‘great’ requires leaders who are humble in a true sense and who have unbreakable wills. Leaders’ humility has emerged as a central topic in the areas of leadership and business ethics (Argandona, 2015; Frostenson, 2016; Lin, Chen, Herman, Wei, & Ma, 2017).

The term ‘humility’ is derived from the Latin word humus, which means to have the earth under you or to be ‘on the ground’ (Aquinas, 1981). Literature in the domain of leader humility has identified its antecedents and consequences. For instance, research has highlighted that a leader’s personality traits, such as openness, transcendence, emotional intelligence, and a low level of narcissism tend to accompany humility (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005). Contemporary research has also identified leader humility as a leadership approach that aids in the development of favorable employee attitudes and behaviors. For example, leader humility has been related to individual-level outcomes like followers’ job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, loyalty, and job performance (Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Owens, Wallace, & Waldman, 2015) and group- and organizational-level outcomes like team performance, organizational innovation, and cooperation and cohesion among top management team members (Chiu, Owens, & Tesluk, 2016; Ou et al., 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2016).

Although recent research has investigated a variety of positive effects of leader humility on employees’ work-related outcomes, the role that leader humility can play in promoting employees’ positive psychological resources and emotions, such as empathy and gratitude, has been comparatively neglected (Owens & Hekman, 2012, 2016). In their meta-analysis on gratitude, Davis et al. (2016) suggested that researchers study the positive work-related antecedents of employees’ gratitude. Similarly, systematic reviews and meta-analysis on empathy as an emotion have highlighted a number of constructive consequences of various types of empathy, but there is a dearth of research on the factors and mechanisms that fuel individuals’ empathy (Van Langen, Wissink, Van Vugt, Stouwe & Stams, 2014). We extend the relatively scarce literature on leader humility by examining employee empathy and gratitude as outcomes of humble leaders.

CONTACT Saima Naseer saimanaseersheikh@yahoo.com

© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
In an attempt to broaden this literature, we also investigate the impact of leaders’ humility in fostering their followers’ ethical behavior in organizations.

Empirical and inductive research in the domain of leader humility has suggested that leader humility nurtures supportive organizational climates such as empowering climate and team integration (Ou et al., 2014). Research into this line of inquiry suggests that leader humility paves way for the development of an environment where followers develop the capability to be more self-aware and engage in moral reasoning (Morris et al., 2005). Even though leader humility has been recognized as a stimulus for driving positive perceptions of organizational contexts, interpersonal connections, and team processes, there is a need to examine the role of leader humility in fostering perceptions of other climate types (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013) such as workplace spirituality.

Houghton, Neck, and Krishnakumar’s (2016) review on workplace spirituality summarized and expanded research in this domain and concluded that there is significant potential for future studies to investigate various types of leadership as determinants of workplace spirituality. These authors identified that the spiritual freedom model can be benefited by investigating various leadership types as antecedents to workplace spirituality (Houghton et al., 2016). Although a stream of research has examined the part

Even though results of examining the direct effects of leader humility on outcomes are abundant with promising findings, research on the primary processes through which leader humility shapes followers’ behaviors remain sparse (Morris et al., 2005; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Gonçalves and Brandão (2017) argued that, although leader humility has been acknowledged to make followers more effective, the specific mechanisms through which this process transpires is still unclear. Rego et al. (2017) found that psychological capital and task allocation mediate the relationship between a leader’s humility and team performance. The authors called future researchers to identify other processes through which leader humility fosters individual outcomes (Rego et al., 2017). Other studies on leader humility have emphasized that, in spite of humility’s presence in contemporary approaches to leadership and its effects on a range of individual- and team-level outcomes, research has fallen short of revealing unique mediators through which humble leaders can play in enabling workplace spirituality (Fry, 2003; Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005). However, how other leader types and characteristics that might facilitate the development of workplace spirituality perceptions are still limited (Houghton et al., 2016; Pawar, 2014). We contribute to the nascent domain of workplace spirituality by analyzing leader humility as an important predictor in building workplace spirituality perceptions.

Figure 1 depicts a time-lagged mediated model whereby Leader Humility effects Ethical Behavior, Gratitude, and Empathy through the mechanism of Workplace Spirituality.
leaders engender positive employee outcomes (Lin et al., 2017; Oc, Bashshur, Daniels, Greguras, & Diefendorff, 2015; Wang, Zhang, & Jia, 2017).

Despite calls for developing and promoting increased leader humility in organizations, researchers still have an ambiguous idea of why and how and through what mechanisms humble leadership influences employee outcomes and operates within organizations (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Recently, Ou, Waldman, and Peterson (2018) reported that humble top leaders are more likely to enhance firm performance through integrating top management teams. The authors highlighted that under a humble leader top management teams are likely to share information with each other and possess a common vision.
Chen, Liu, Zhang, and Qian (2018) in a sample of Chinese employees found psychological empowerment as a mediating mechanism in the leader humility and follower’s proactive behaviors relationship. The authors called future researchers to contribute to the humble leadership area by focusing more attention on examining the dynamics through which humble leaders influence follower outcomes specifically in a non-western context (Chen et al., 2018). Consistent with recent empirical research we believe that one of the key questions that needs to be answered is what new mechanisms can enrich our understanding of how leader humility can create followers’ positive emotions and behaviors. We believe that workplace spirituality is one such mediator which can offer a new explanation through which humble leaders sparks positive emotions and behaviors. The present study contributes to the scant literature on leader humility by examining how it predicts employees’ positive emotions and behaviors through the underlying mechanism of workplace spirituality.

We use as an overarching framework of social information processing (SIP) theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Thomas & Griffin, 1983), which proposes that employees’ attitudes and behaviors are the outcomes of receiving and evaluating information in their social context. Leaders play an important role in providing social cues and influencing follower’s environment. We suggest that humble leaders can provide positive signals to followers that lead to perceptions of a spiritual workplace and, eventually, ethical behaviors and positive emotions at work (see Figure 1 above)

Theory and hypotheses

The relationship between leader humility and positive employee outcomes

Leader humility encompasses actions that indicate a leader’s readiness to view himself or herself appropriately, to value others’ qualities and strengths, and to be teachable (Owens & Hekman, 2016). We employ SIP theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) to elucidate the role that leader humility can play in inciting positive emotions (empathy and gratitude) and ethical behaviors in followers. Ethical behavior refers to actions that are considered morally acceptable, where such moral acceptability assist individuals in determining what they ought to do or not do in certain situations (Lewis, 1985).

The basic premise of SIP theory is that, as social animals, people adjust their opinions, actions, and emotions in accordance with their environment and their own previous and current behaviors, experiences, and contexts. Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) proposed that a person’s behavior can be interpreted only in light of the contextual and informational setting within which the behavior transpires. Leaders provide influential social information to their followers because of their high status and frequent communication (Yaffe & Kark, 2011). Employees depend on their leaders to provide social cues and information that affect how they think and behave (Boomer, Rubin & Baldwin, 2004).

Based on SIP theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), we contend that, since humble leaders tend to interpret themselves and others objectively (Owens et al., 2013), employees are likely to follow suit in viewing themselves and others fairly and objectively. Empirical research already supports the notion that humble leaders have a down to earth view of themselves and others whereby they not only open accept and admit their flaws but also acknowledge and identify other’s strengths and weaknesses making them more fair and impartial in their judgment of others (Owens & Hekman, 2012, 2016; Owens et al., 2013). Followers who work under a humble leader are likely to indulge in ethical behavior because they learn to process uncertain and ambiguous information in an objective and impartial manner. Since humble leaders tend to deal with followers justly and openly (Oc et al., 2015), such leaders will inculcate and propagate in followers the clear demarcation between right and wrong behavior, thereby generating high levels of ethical behavior in their followers. We also contend that leaders’ humility fosters positive emotions in the form of empathy and gratitude. Gratitude is related to feelings of happiness, contentment, and thankfulness in reaction to receiving something (Emmons & McCullough, 2004), while empathy refers to an individual’s capacity to recognize, appreciate, and consider others’ emotional conditions and circumstances (Cohen & Strayer, 1996).

When leaders are humble, they place others’ interests and needs above their own (Morris et al., 2005). Research has found that humble leaders value others’ contributions and achievements more than their own and encourage followers to engage in perspective-taking (Wang et al., 2017). Drawing from SIP theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), we contend that followers who work under a humble leader observe their leaders’ selfless and giving nature and encode these social cues as a way to develop their own empathy. SIP theory also suggests that followers construe humble leaders’ acknowledging their mistakes and highlighting their followers’ strengths as signs of encouragement and appreciation and develop feelings of gratitude toward them. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Leader humility is positively related to employees’ (a) ethical behavior, (b) gratitude, and (c) empathy.
**The relationship between leader humility and workplace spirituality**

Workplace spirituality refers to the degree to which employees view their organizations as spiritual. Workplace spirituality acknowledges that individuals have an inner life that is nurtured when they sense their work is meaningful, establish a feeling of collective welfare, and develop values that are congruent with their organization’s goals and values (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000).

Since humble leaders believe that they are not all-knowing or all-powerful, they tend to be receptive to their followers’ ideas and feedback (Owens & Hekman, 2012), which arouses in their followers a sense that their work is meaningful and enhances workplace spirituality. Using SIP theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), we assert that, since humble leaders promote psychological freedom in their followers, such empowered and confident followers will view their leaders’ behaviors as social cues from which they derive a sense of purpose and significance from their work that increases workplace spirituality.

In line with SIP theory, since humble leaders inspire their followers to think beyond themselves and consider their colleagues, customers, and society above themselves, these followers establish a sense of community and collaboration with others, thereby building high levels of workplace spirituality. As humble leaders lead from the bottom up, their ability to appraise objectively and provide a model for their followers’ growth instills the core organizational values in their followers that allow them to adjust well to the organization and increase their perceptions of workplace spirituality. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 2:** Leader humility is positively related to workplace spirituality.

**The relationship between workplace spirituality and positive employee outcomes**

Houghton et al. (2016) found that the development of workplace spirituality can promote a number of positive consequences for individuals, including organizational commitment, job satisfaction, trust, honesty, creativity, work engagement, personal fulfillment, and intrinsic motivation. Although a few studies have established positive associations between workplace spirituality and ethical behavior (Fry et al., 2005; Pawar, 2009), there is a paucity of research that has examined the impact of workplace spirituality on fostering positive emotions like empathy and gratitude.

A central feature of workplace spirituality is the development of an inner sense of purpose and fulfillment in one’s work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Based on SIP theory, we contend that individuals who perceive high levels of workplace spirituality have their own inner drives and motivations to continue work. This deep sense of willingness gives meaning to their lives that increases the likelihood that they will exhibit ethical behaviors. Since workplace spirituality includes seeking inner motivation through one’s work (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000), such individuals not only know how to differentiate good from evil but also demonstrate morally correct, ethical behavior.

High levels of workplace spirituality imply strong bonds and relationships with others, which Ashmos and Duchon (2000) conceptualized as a collective feeling of community. Based on SIP theory, we assert that this sense of community signals to employees that they must seek to understand others’ viewpoints and connect with one another mentally and emotionally, thereby promoting empathy. Employees in a highly spiritual workplace pay attention and scan the social environment because they are a part of an organizational family in which everyone genuinely cares and supports one another, automatically triggering feelings of gratitude. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 3:** Workplace spirituality is positively related to employees’ (a) ethical behavior, (b) gratitude, and (c) empathy.

**The mediating effects of workplace spirituality**

Employing SIP theory, we suggest that a leader’s humility can enhance his or her followers’ positive emotions and behaviors through the underlying dynamics of workplace spirituality. Research in the domain of leader humility has identified a number of mediating mechanisms in the relationship between leader humility and followers’ outcomes, including the effectiveness of task allocation and followers’ psychological capital, psychological safety, personal sense of power, perspective-taking, cognitive reappraisal, contagion/collective promotion focus, and personal sense of power (Gonçalves & Brandão, 2017; Lin et al., 2017; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Rego et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017).

Although these mediators inform our understanding of how humble leaders can influence positive follower outcomes, the construct of workplace spirituality is still missing in this domain (Houghton et al., 2016). Despite the numerous leadership types, such as spiritual leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, and ethical leadership, in facilitating a spiritual workplace (Fry, 2003; Fry et al., 2005), we suggest that workplace spirituality can offer a new lens through which leader humility can encourage positive emotions and behaviors.
One of the main assumptions of SIP theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) is that individual’s process information which they receive from the environment. Leaders as representatives of the organization can be instrumental in helping employees indoctrinate certain information such as perpetuating perceptions of a spiritual workplace. Specifically, humble leaders might facilitate not only in the development but also in the interpretation of social cues in a more spiritual light which might set the stage for engendering positive behaviors and emotions within organizations. Since humble leaders enhance others’ self-perceptions, avoid being manipulative or exploiting others for their own benefit, and are open to suggestions and ideas from others (Owens & Hekman, 2012), their followers see the work environment as giving them a sense of purpose and meaning, which increases workplace spirituality. According to SIP, humble leaders due to their self-transcendence, low self-focus and lack of superiority (Davis et al., 2011; Ou et al., 2014) might help followers to view their environment as a place where the leader is sacrificing and promoting a communal environment among followers which then spurs increased perceptions of workplace spirituality. Such higher interpretations of workplace spirituality where employees feel work as meaningful, an inner life and interconnectedness with colleagues and boss might then make employees construct their responses in a positive light and react constructively by engaging in ethical behaviors and exhibit emotions of gratitude and empathy.

Humble leaders are fair and transparent in their dealings with others, admit their weaknesses, and highlight others’ achievements (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013), all of which promote interconnectedness in the form of spirituality and promote followers’ empathy, gratitude, and ethical behavior. Humble leaders emphasize follower’s professional growth and serve their followers’ interests, which aligns followers and organizational goals and encourages followers to follow acceptable standards of ethical behavior, show empathy, and demonstrate gratitude. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4**: Workplace spirituality mediates the relationship between leader humility and employees’ (a) ethical behavior, (b) gratitude, and (c) empathy.

**Methods**

**Participants and procedure**

We used a time-lagged research design to examine the causal effects of the proposed model. Data were collected at three time intervals, each separated by approximately a month. Surveys were distributed to employees in nine organizations in the telecom, industrial, and education sectors in Islamabad and Lahore, Pakistan. Personal and professional contacts were used to access the organizations. The contact persons from organizations helped in getting the data filled at three different time periods of data collection phase. We relied on convenience sampling in combination with onsite survey administration. Despite choosing two major cities and participating organizations based on convenience, within these companies, we ensured random sampling by choosing the sample respondents with the help of focal persons from organizations. The data were captured from cosmopolitan and developed cities in Pakistan. In general, the character of cosmopolitan cities is such that it offers an excellent representation of the labor force. Previous studies conducted in Pakistan have relied successfully on similar sampling methodologies to warrant the generalizability of their findings (for example, Abbas, Raja, Darr, & Bouckenooghe, 2014; Naseer, Raja, Syed, Donia, & Darr, 2016). Moreover, in service sector human interaction is high, thus we chose such sector to reflect high representativeness of the population.

The first page of the survey described the purpose of the study and guidelines regarding completing the survey. The second section comprised questions about the respondents’ demographics. Respondents provided a unique ID that helped us to match the respondents’ responses at each of the time lags. Leader humility was measured at time 1, workplace spirituality at time 2, and empathy and gratitude at time 3. Ethical behavior was peer-reported. The respondents were asked to identify their peer in organizations who have at least worked for six months in the same organization. Data nesting were eliminated by ensuring that one peer only reported for one respondent. This was done by requesting the contact person in organizations during data collection and getting the peer reports at the end with peer coding. We removed the cases where one peer reported for two or more respondents.

500 questionnaires were distributed at time 1, out of which 395 responses were useable, for a response rate of 79%. Approximately one month later, we fielded surveys to the respondents who had provided usable surveys at time 1. Of those 395 surveys, we attained matched time-1 and time-2 responses from 305 respondents, for a response rate of 61%. Four weeks later, the 305 respondents were asked to fill out a final survey and nominated peers with whom they had been acquainted for the past six months, who reported on the respondents’ ethical behavior. The final sample of 286 respondents represented an overall response rate of 57%.

The final sample consisted of 62.2% males and 37.85% females. The frequency distributions revealed that most of
the study participants (69.2%) held master’s degrees. Most of the sample were entry-level managers (58.7%) and were married (50.3%). Most respondents were 31–40 years old (42.7%). Respondents had an average of 7.70 (SD = 8.73) years of experience, and 7.09 (SD = 6.08) years of experience in their current organizations. As our study examines the effect of leader humility, we also measured the time the respondent had spent working with his or her current leader (4.07 (SD = 4.0) years).

**Measures**

English is the official language in Pakistan’s organizations and is also the medium of instruction for all institutions of higher education in Pakistan. That most of our respondents held master’s degrees indicates that they can understand English. Studies that have been conducted in Pakistan have indicated that English is an appropriate and understandable medium in the country and that there is no need to translate questionnaires into local languages (Abbas et al., 2014; Naseer et al., 2016). Therefore, we did not translate our survey into Urdu. All scales were measured on 7-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from 1 = ‘strongly disagree’; to 7 = ‘strongly agree.’

**Leader humility**

Leader humility was measured at time 1 with a 9-item scale developed by Owens and Hekman (2016). Referring to each respondent’s leader, sample items included ‘This leader actively seeks feedback, even if it is critical’ and ‘This leader shows he or she is open to the advice of others.’ The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale’s reliability in the present study was 0.95.

**Workplace spirituality**

Workplace spirituality was tapped at time 2 with a 17-item scale adopted from Ashmos and Duchon (2000). The items included ‘I see a connection between my work and the larger social good of my community’ and ‘The work I do is connected to what I think is important in life.’ The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale’s reliability in the present study was 0.96.

**Empathy**

Empathy was measured at time 3 with a 12-item scale developed by Reniers, Corcoran, Drake, Shryane, and Völlm (2011). The items included ‘I am happy when I am with a cheerful group and sad when the others are glum’ and ‘It worries me when others are worrying and panicky.’ The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale’s reliability in our study was 0.94.

**Gratitude**

Gratitude was measured at time 3 using a 6-item scale developed by Mael (1988). The items included ‘I am grateful to a wide variety of people’ and ‘As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.’ The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale’s reliability in our study was 0.85.

**Ethical behavior**

Ethical behavior was measured by the respondents’ peers using a 17-item scale developed by Akaah and Lund (1994). The items included ‘This person does not give gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment’ and ‘This person reports others’ violations of company policies and rules.’ The Cronbach’s alpha for scale reliability was 0.97.

**Common method bias**

To address the possible method bias we adopted a time-lagged design for data collection. Each time lag was separated by one month (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). In the cover letter, we ensured that respondent confidentiality would be maintained and respondents who did want to mention their names could provide their date of birth or any key for identification purposes. They were allowed to generate a code to match their responses at time 2 and time 3. One of the criterion variables i.e. ethical behaviors were reported by peers that also helped to address self-reporting bias.

Moreover, we used a common latent factor and linked to all of the observed items. After comparing with and without common latent factor, it was observed that there was no noticeable change in loadings in most of the observed items except three items where it was in the range of .25–.30. After fixing this issue, this analysis found that the common latent variable has a linear estimate of .58. This value, when squared, indicates a variance of .33 which is also below the threshold of .50. It means there is no issue of shared variance among variables under study and possible bias due to social desirability could not influence our findings (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

**Validity of measures**

We conducted different tests to ensure the construct and discriminant validity of all measures adopted. We assessed convergent validity levels from factor loadings of constructs, measured composite reliability (CR) and average
variance extracted (AVE). All items factor loadings were more than .40, CR for all the study’s variables was .70 and AVE for each variable was greater than .50 which indicated a good level of convergent validity of all measures. To establish that all study variables are distinct from each other, we examined the discriminant validity of all measures by contrasting the AVE with the maximum shared variance (MSV) of each construct (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991). We found the AVE extracted from all constructs to be greater than corresponding MSV values, which demonstrate discriminant validity of all variables under study (Hair, et al., 2006) as given in Table 2. In order to ascertain the discriminant validity of our study’s variables, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. We compared one composite factor model where all items of all study variables were loaded on one factor and compared with five-factor full measurement model. The results indicated that items loaded with high values on their respective variables as compared to the one combined factor.

**Confirmatory factor analysis**

In order to ascertain the discriminant validity of our study’s variables, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of variables that were tapped at the same time from the same source. Since empathy and gratitude were reported by employees at time 3, we compared a two-factor model with a one-factor model and found that the two-factor model that contains empathy and gratitude ($\chi^2 = 605.77, df = 101, p < .001; CFI = .90, GFI = .84, NFI = .88, RMSEA = .12$) had a better fit than the one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 637.98, df = 102, p < .001; CFI = .89, GFI = .81, NFI = .88, RMSEA = .13$).

We also ran a series of alternative measurement models, which demonstrated the superiority of our hypothesized model over these models. We compared our hypothesized five-factor model with four alternate models. Our hypothesized five-factor model had an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 3765, df = 1564, \chi^2/\text{Df} = 2.41, p < 0.001; CFI = .90, NFI = .84, IFI = .90, RMSEA = .07$). Model 1 was a four-factor in which we combined the two dependent variables measured from the same source at time 3 i.e. empathy and gratitude into one factor whereas the observed variables of the rest of the three factors of leader humility, workplace spirituality, and ethical behavior were loaded on to their respective latent variables. The results of this model showed poor fit as in comparison to the five-factor hypothesized model ($\chi^2 = 4947, df = 1603, \chi^2/\text{Df} = 3.09, p < 0.001; CFI = .84, NFI = .79, IFI = .84, RMSEA = .09$). Model 2 was a three-factor model in which all dependent variables were combined to form one factor whereas the other two factors comprised of leader humility and workplace spirituality which was also a poor fit ($\chi^2 = 7292, df = 1667, \chi^2/\text{Df} = 4.37, p < 0.001; CFI = .74, NFI = .69, IFI = .74, RMSEA = .11$). Model 3 was a two factor model in which workplace spirituality and all the three dependent variables were combined to form one latent variable and the other factor was leader humility which also showed poor fit ($\chi^2 = 10791, df = 1741, \chi^2/\text{Df} = 6.20, p < 0.001; CFI = .58, NFI = .54, IFI = .58, RMSEA = .14$). Finally, model 4 comprised a one-factor model in which all the variables were combined to form a single latent variable and demonstrated the worst fit ($\chi^2 = 12040, df = 1750, \chi^2/\text{Df} = 6.88, p < 0.001; CFI = .52, NFI = .48, IFI = .52, RMSEA = .15$). Overall this provided evidence that the hypothesized five-factor model

---

**Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis examining different alternative measurement models with hypothesized model.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>$\chi^2$/Df</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>IFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M0: Hypothesized 5 Factor Model</td>
<td>3765</td>
<td>1564</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1: Four factor model by combining empathy and gratitude into one factor</td>
<td>4947</td>
<td>1603</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2: Three factor models by combining all dependent variables into one factor</td>
<td>7292</td>
<td>1667</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3: Two Factor model by combining workplace spirituality and all dependent variables into one factor</td>
<td>10791</td>
<td>1741</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4: One Factor model</td>
<td>12040</td>
<td>1750</td>
<td>6.88</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 286.

**Table 2. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities for main variables of interest in the study.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>MSV</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Leader Humility (Time-1)</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>(.95)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Workplace Spirituality (Time-2)</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>(.96)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Gratitude (Time-3)</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>(.85)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Empathy (Time-3)</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Ethical Behavior (Peer reported)</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.85**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>(.97)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note n = 286; CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; MSV = Maximum shared variance. Control Variables are organization type, designation, gender, age, education, marital status. Gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female) and education (1 = Bachelors and below, 2 = Masters and above) and marital status (1 = Unmarried, 2 = Married) had two categories whereas age is a continuous variable. Organization had three categories (1 = Government, 2 = Semi Government and 3 = Private) and designation had five categories (1 = Technical, 2 = Entry, 3 = Middle and 4 = Top level). Alpha reliabilities are given in parenthesis.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
demonstrated better fit than the other alternative models and also showed that the distinctiveness of the study’s constructs (see Table 1 above).

Results

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability of the variables under study. Leader humility was significantly and positively correlated with workplace spirituality (r = .65, p < .01), gratitude (r = .56, p < .01), empathy (r = .66, p < .01), and ethical behavior (r = .63, p < .01). Workplace spirituality was also significantly associated with gratitude (r = .59, p < .01), empathy (r = .67, p < .01), and ethical behavior (r = .65, p < .01).

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) technique using AMOS 18 software to test our proposed model. SEM is a multivariate statistical technique for examining a series of regression equations simultaneously (Byrne, 2013). The widely used SEM technique comprises two steps: a full measurement model that contains the CFA of all of the study’s variables, and the structural or path model. We ran the full measurement model first, and once the full CFA model was authenticated, we performed the path analysis to substantiate the direct and indirect effects of the study’s hypotheses. To validate our mediation hypothesis, we employed the bootstrapping technique in AMOS using a 95% confidence interval.

Measurement model (full CFA model)

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to validate the full measurement model, which includes the five study variables (i.e. leader humility, workplace spirituality, ethical behavior, empathy, and gratitude). Our results showed that the hypothesized five-factor model had acceptable model fit (χ² = 3765, df = 1564, χ²/df = 2.41, p < .001; CFI = .90, NFI = .84, IFI = .90, RMSEA = .07). The full measurement model also showed that the factor loading for each item of the respective variable was above 0.40, suggesting adequate validity (see Figure 2).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) results

After receiving an acceptable model fit with our full measurement model and eliminating all probable alternative models, we ran our structural model using the SEM technique to confirm our study’s hypotheses. The results of our structural model depicted adequate fit to the data (χ² = 5306.08, DF = 1615, CFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.08). The findings are shown in Table 3(a,b) for the direct and indirect effects hypotheses using SEM. Figure 3 reports the standardized path coefficients, their significance, and the variance attributed to each path.

Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c state that leader humility is positively related to employees’ ethical behavior, gratitude, and empathy, respectively. In line with these hypotheses, our findings demonstrate that the direct paths running from leader humility are significantly and positively related to employees’ ethical behavior (β = 0.43, p < 0.001), gratitude (β = 0.30, p < 0.001), and empathy (β = 0.50, p < 0.001). Thus, H1 (a, b, and c) is supported. Similarly, as proposed in hypothesis 2, leader humility is significantly and positively related to workplace spirituality (β = 0.65, p < 0.001), demonstrating full support for H2. Consistent with hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c the direct paths running from workplace spirituality to employee’s ethical behavior (β = 0.38, p < 0.001), gratitude (β = 0.34, p < 0.001) and empathy (β = 0.33, p < 0.001) was significant and positive. Hence, hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c are supported.

Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c are the mediation hypotheses. We employed a bootstrapping technique to show

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hyp No</th>
<th>Direct Paths</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1a</td>
<td>Leader Humility → Ethical Behaviour</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1b</td>
<td>Leader Humility → Gratitude</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1c</td>
<td>Leader Humility → Empathy</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Leader Humility → Workplace Spirituality</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>9.25</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3a</td>
<td>Workplace Spirituality → Ethical Behaviour</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3b</td>
<td>Workplace Spirituality → Gratitude</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3c</td>
<td>Workplace Spirituality → Empathy</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indirect Paths</th>
<th>Indirect Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Lower Limit</th>
<th>Upper Limit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H4a Leader Humility → Workplace Spirituality → Ethical Behaviour</td>
<td>0.25***</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4b Leader Humility → Workplace Spirituality → Gratitude</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4c Leader Humility → Workplace Spirituality → Empathy</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 286; Bootstrap sample size = 2000, BC 95% CI = Bootstrap confidence Intervals.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
that the indirect effects of time-lagged leader humility on ethical behavior (indirect effect = 0.25, p < 0.001), gratitude (indirect effect = 0.22, p < 0.01), and empathy (indirect effect = 0.22, p < 0.01) through workplace spirituality are significant (two-tailed significance with normal distribution. The findings were substantiated through the bootstrap bias-corrected 95% confidence interval, which was non-zero for ethical behavior (0.16, 0.36), gratitude (0.12, 0.34), and empathy (0.13, 0.33). Thus, hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c are supported.

**Discussion**

For the past few decades, researchers and philosophers in the leadership domain have sought to address the significance of humility in the leadership arena. Appeals to focus on leader humility have increased because of the prevalence of unethical leader behaviors, corporate scandals, and narcissistic leadership tendencies (Boje, Roslie, Durant, & Luhman, 2004). Recent research in the area of leaders’ humility has identified a plethora of studies that have examined the direct effects of humble leadership on employees’ outcomes. However, the role that leader’s humility can have in fostering employees’ empathy, gratitude, and ethical behaviors has not yet been determined (Davis et al., 2016; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Further, the mechanisms through which humble leaders affect employees’ positive emotions and behaviors are scarce (Lin et al., 2017; Rego et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017). This study contributes to the literature on leaders’ humility and clarifies the impact of a leader’s humility in promoting positive employee emotions and behaviors through the unique process of workplace spirituality.

Overall, we found good support for our proposed hypotheses. The results of our study demonstrated strong support for our direct and indirect effects. Our findings are consistent with past research which indicates that humble leaders directly foster employee’s ethical behavior (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Park & Peterson, 2003), gratitude (Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014), and empathy (Davis et al., 2011; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012). Our study contributes to the positive psychology domain by suggesting that leaders’ humility plays an important role in promoting employees’ positive psychological resources and emotions. Further, we found support for an indirect effect of leaders’ humility on ethical behavior, gratitude, and empathy via workplace spirituality. The findings suggest that humble leaders create an environment of workplace spirituality which is then influential in fostering employees’ ethical behavior, gratitude, and empathy. The findings extend the pattern of findings by Fry (2003) and Pawar (2009) indicating the significance of leaders’ humility in promoting workplace spirituality and further enhancing employees’ positive emotions and behaviors. The present study thus opens up a new area of research responding to the calls by recent researchers (Gonçalves & Brandão, 2017; Lin et al., 2017; Oc et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2017) to identify unique mechanisms through which leaders’ humility engender positive employee outcomes. Our study suggests workplace spirituality as an underlying mechanism through

---

**Figure 3.** Hypothesized structural model and Structural Equation Model (SEM) results.

N = 286: Full Structural model showing direct and mediating effects for variables under study. Mediation paths run from Leader’s humility to workplace spirituality to outcomes (i.e. ethical behaviors, empathy, and gratitude). Standardized Regression weight values are shown on the paths with asterisks indicating the significance values. $R^2$ denotes the percentage variance for each path, respectively.
which leader humility shapes followers’ positive emotions and behaviors.

We used SIP theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) to describe our research model. Our study provides numerous theoretical and methodological insights. Our study investigated leader humility, which is one of the fastest-growing topics in the positive OB literature, particularly in the current century, during which dark leadership traits have plagued organizations. The present study is unique in that it examines workplace spirituality as a process through which humble leaders influence their followers’ positive emotions and behaviors. We used a time-lagged research design with data collected from independent sources at three time intervals. We also employed SEM approach to test our study’s hypotheses. The findings of the study and the confirmation of all the hypothesized main and mediating effects are testament to the importance and statistical power of this technique.

Even though the present study has new theoretical and empirical strengths, it also has a few limitations. Our study employed temporally segregated data collected at three different times, but it cannot be categorized as a complete longitudinal research design. Future researchers could employ a pure longitudinal design, where all of the variables are measured repeatedly at various time intervals. We examined two positive emotions, empathy and gratitude, and one behavioral outcome, ethical behavior. Future research could examine other attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as employee engagement, job involvement, job performance, OCBs, and so on. Another limitation is that the present study conceptualized and measured leader humility and perception of workplace spirituality at the individual level of analysis (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Milliman, Czaplewski, & Ferguson, 2003; Milliman, Gatling, & Kim, 2018; Owens & Hekman, 2016; Rego et al., 2017). Future researchers can consider collecting data from leaders apart from employees in order to measure leader humility so as to determine how employees nested in leaders can have similar perceptions of their leaders making multi-level analysis with leader-employee dyads possible. Even if we considered performing multilevel analysis by aggregating individual data within organizations, our sample size is small both at level 2 (i.e. 9 organizations) and level 1 (i.e. 286 employees) which does not make multi-level analysis feasible (Cohen, 2005; Maas & Hox, 2005; Scherbaum & Ferreter, 2009).

Although the current study unveiled how humble leaders promote positive emotions and ethical behaviors through the process of workplace spirituality, nonetheless this was done by performing a single study. Future researchers can replicate the present study’s findings in other cultures and employing different samples and industries as well. Future research could also study other mechanisms that can illuminate the positive effects of humble leaders on followers’ outcomes, such as PO fit and organizational identification, to reiterate the prominence of humble leadership in contemporary organizations. Though the present study identified workplace spirituality as a mechanism in the leader humility and follower outcomes relationship, it would be interesting for future researchers to untangle workplace spirituality as a moderator signifying the conditions under which humble leaders can foster positive outcomes for followers.

The current study has several practical implications for managers and organizations. Managers should develop humility in their leaders to increase followers’ gratitude and help them view others’ perspectives and be more ethical. Training programs should be designed to foster the positive virtue of humility in leaders at all levels. Our study shows that humble leaders stimulate positive emotions and behaviors in their employees by cultivating an environment of workplace spirituality. Organizations should arrange workshops and seminars to communicate the importance of spirituality in one’s work. The stress levels of employees who face excessive workloads and other issues can be reduced by inculcating perceptions of workplace spirituality. An organizational culture that values integrity and modesty might bring humble leaders into the limelight, which could be beneficial in creating a spiritual workplace.

Most of the studies in this area have been conducted chiefly in developed countries in the west, so our understanding of how many theories in the positive OB domain operate from the perspective of developing countries is inadequate. Our study offers new insights into leader humility’s underlying dynamics and effects in a new setting, that of a developing country (Pakistan), a focus that is scarce in the positive psychology research. Pakistan’s a highly collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1983) suggests that individuals look up to leaders for cues and process information. Past research on leader humility has already identified that humble leaders are more effective in collectivist cultures where individuals value the memberships of their in-groups and demonstrate strong loyalty towards them as in comparison to individualistic cultures (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In such a setting, humble leaders are instrumental in generating workplace spirituality and fostering positive emotions and behaviors. In such cultures, individuals are tightly integrated into in-groups and demonstrate strong affiliation with those groups’ members, so they are likely to be willing to establish
a sense of community with their co-workers and to align their goals and values to those of the organization, increasing workplace spirituality.

In collectivistic cultures, the focus is more on ‘We’ rather than ‘I’ consciousness and relationships are highly valued (Hofstede, 1983). Such strongly knit and cohesive in-group cultures would create a more conducive environment where humble leaders can spur individuals to develop a sense of community, promote higher alignment of individual’s values with organizational values and meaningfulness of work enhancing workplace spirituality perceptions. Although examining national culture was not the objective of the present study, future studies in the leader humility and workplace spirituality domain can benefit by analyzing national culture specifically individualism vs. collectivism as a moderator in the leader humility and workplace spirituality relationship.

To conclude, our research contributes to the positive OB domain by revealing the positive effects of leader humility on nurturing the kind of spiritual workplace that facilitates employees’ positive emotions and behaviors. The current study opens a new pathway in the leadership and spirituality domains and leads the way for future researchers to test more complex models in newer settings to further what we know about these processes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The current Research did not include formal financial funding and/or support. The author(s) declared that preparation of this manuscript was not supported by any external funding and is the effort of the authors included.

Geo-location Information

The current study was conducted in Islamabad and Rawalpindi which is the Federal Capital city of Pakistan.

References


