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School principal moral leadership and teachers' voice behavior: Work role engagement and interpersonal perspectives mediation

Qinglin Wang[1,2], Hang Zhang[2], Junzhe Zhao[2], Wenfan Chao[2] and Minghui Wang[2,*]

[1] *School of Management, Jinan University, 601 West Huangpu Avenue, Guangzhou, 510632, China*
[2] *School of Psychology, Henan University, Jinming Road, Kaifeng, 475004, China*
*Correspondence: Minghui Wang, wmhwang@henu.edu.cn

Abstract: This study investigated the role of work role engagement and interpersonal perspectives mediation in the relationship between school principal moral leadership and teachers' voice behavior. A sample comprising 315 middle school teachers from a central province in China participated in the research (females = 73.3%). These teachers completed surveys on moral leadership, work engagement, trust in superiors, and voice behavior. The results of dual mediation modeling indicated evidence of an indirect effect of moral leadership on teachers' voice behavior through work engagement. The results also indicated evidence of mediating effect of trust between moral leadership and teachers' voice behavior. Our findings provide the evidence for moral leadership on teachers' voice behavior in the Chinese educational context consistent with social exchange theory. To promote teacher voice behavior, in addition to increasing a leader's level of moral leadership, it can also increase subordinates' engagement to their work and trust in the leader.

Keywords: moral leadership; work engagement; trust; voice behavior

Introduction

The contemporary educational environment requires educators to openly share their ideas for better work outcomes to the mission of their schools (Zhang et al., 2021). This phenomenon is referred to as voice behavior. Voice behavior is expression of constructive feedback addressing concerns and propose potential solutions (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Wang et al., 2023) for higher work role engagement. Work role engagement refers to a positive and fulfilling mental state related to one's professional responsibilities, characterized by vigor, absorption, and dedication (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Wu, et al., 2014). It is associated with trust as a psychological state where individuals are willing to be vulnerable with others, driven by positive expectations of their intentions and actions (Rousseau et al., 1998). However, in some work contexts, many teachers perceive the risks associated with speaking out as outweighing the benefits, leading them to prefer silence in the school environment (Detert & Burris, 2007; Hung, 2019; Jiang & Liu, 2008; Wang & Fwu, 2014). This would be the case in collectivist culture that places a high value on hierarchical authority, such as that of the school principal.

Moral leadership and voice behavior

Moral leadership refers to exemplifying organizational norms and propriety in their conduct and interactions (Brown et al., 2005; Ling, 1987; Zheng, et al., 2000). High moral leadership inspires ethical behavior in subordinates through dialogue, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown et al., 2005; Huang & Wen, 2016; Treviño et al., 2000). It promotes positivity and significantly influences employees' attitudes and actions (Sagnak, 2017; Yu, et al., 2017; Zhang, et al., 2018). In other words, moral leadership enhances subordinates' perceptions of fairness,

work satisfaction, and organizational commitment, while also fostering innovative performance (Han & Zhang, 2015; Jing & Bai, 2021; Zhong et al., 2019), as well as team work and self-regulation (Wang et al., 2019).

A substantial amount of research indicates a positive correlation between a school principal's authentic leadership and teacher voice behavior. This effect may be explained by transformational qualities by which school leaders model to teachers how to carry out their work roles.

When organizational members trust their leaders, they are more adept at the generation of innovative solutions to improve work outcomes (Liu, et al., 2018; Wang, et al., 2020). As an ethical person, the moral leader focuses on being people-oriented in his interactions with subordinates, caring for, respecting and treating them well, and being able to be fair and impartial in his decision-making process.

Voice behavior promotes interpersonal communication to improve work or organizational conditions (Le Pine & Van Dyne, 1998). It encompasses two main types: promotive voice and prohibitive voice, both of which involve offering constructive opinions (Liang et al., 2012). Promotive voice refers to innovative ideas and solutions to problems in order to improve organizational effectiveness, while prohibitive voice points out harmful factors that exist or are potentially harmful within the organization in order to avoid organizational failure (Ward et al., 2016).

Work role engagement and interpersonal trust

Teachers with work engagement have a commitment to their organization and will seek opportunities to enhance current practices in with higher morale and motivation or dedication (Zhao and Zhai, 2018). Previous studies have further demonstrated that moral leadership robustly predicts subordinates' work engagement (Chu & Fang, 2017; Zhong & Lu, 2014), by a mindset to propel
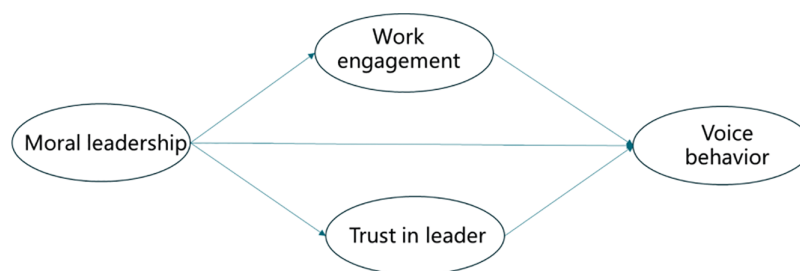
Figure 1. Hypothesized theoretical model

organizational development or mitigate latent risks, with interpersonal trust.

In organizational settings, trust manifests in two main forms: vertical trust, which pertains to the relations between organizational members and leaders, and horizontal trust, which involves interactions among organizational peers. This study examines how the moral leadership exhibited by secondary school principals influence teachers' voice behaviors, with a particular focus on the trust between organizational members and leaders.

Theoretical foundations

According to the principle of reciprocity in social exchange theory (Treviño et al., 2003), in social interactions, interactions between individuals will be based on a basic exchange process where people will decide their own behavior based on the behavior of the other person. When subordinates feel that leaders treat them favorably, they feel obligated to reciprocate. As a prosocial behavior that can promote the development of the organization, voice behavior can also bring benefits to the leader, the agent of the organization. Consequently, they are inclined to proactively offer suggestions for the long-term development of the organization. Previous research has evidenced a positive association between leaders' ethical conduct and employees' voice, including both facilitative and inhibitory forms (Mao et al., 2020; Zhao & Mei, 2022).

Goal of the study. The aim is to examine how moral leadership among secondary school principals influence teachers' voice behaviors with work engagement and interpersonal trust. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed model for our study hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Teachers' moral leadership is positively associated with teachers' voice behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Teachers' work engagement mediates the positive association between secondary school principals' moral leadership and teachers' voice behaviors.

Hypothesis 3: Teachers' trust in their superiors mediates the positive association between their moral leadership and teachers' voice behaviors.

Method

Participants and setting

This study comprised 315 participants, of which 84 (26.7%) were male and 231 (73.3%) were female. Regarding education level, 7 respondents (2.2%) had a high school education or below, 258 respondents (81.9%) were undergraduates, and 50 respondents (15.9%) held master's

degrees or above. In terms of marital status, 270 respondents (85.7%) were married, and 45 respondents (14.3%) were unmarried. The age distribution was as follows: 60 respondents (19.05%) were aged 30 years or below, 136 respondents (43.17%) were aged 31 to 40, 77 respondents (24.44%) were aged 41 to 50, and 42 respondents (13.33%) were aged 51 and above. Regarding years of work experience, 127 respondents (40.32%) had 10 years or less, 104 respondents (33.02%) had 11 to 20 years, 64 respondents (20.32%) had 21 to 30 years, and 30 respondents (9.52%) had 31 years or more.

Measures

All scales in this study underwent back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1986). The items were translated into Chinese and then translated back into English. Two bilingual management scholars compared the English and Chinese versions for consistency and made adjustment as needed. Unless indicated otherwise, all measures used a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

Moral leadership

Moral leadership was assessed using a 6-item scale developed by Xu et al. (2014). An example item is "My supervisor refrains from exploiting me for personal gain". The reliability of the moral leadership scale was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.891$).

Work engagement

To assess employees' work engagement, we utilized the Spanish short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES–9; Schaufeli et al., 2006). This scale comprises nine items grouped into three dimensions, each consisting of three items: vigor (e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), dedication (e.g., "My job inspires me"), and absorption (e.g., "I get carried away when I'm working"). The reliability coefficients for scores for the work engagement cale were satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.872$, 0.875 and 0.850, respectively).

Subordinate's trust in leader

Subordinates' trust in their leader was assessed using a 3-item scale developed by Lambert and colleagues (2012). A sample item is, "My supervisor is trustworthy". The reliability coefficients for the subordinate trust scale were satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.902$).

Voice behavior

Promotive voice and prohibitive voice were each assessed using a 5-item scale developed by Liang et al. (2012). A sample item for promotive voice is, "This subordinate makes suggestions to improve the unit's working procedure." A sample item for prohibitive voice is, "This subordinate speaks up honestly about problems that might cause serious loss to the work unit, even when dissenting opinions exist". The reliability coefficients for voice behavior scores were satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.980$ and 0.937, respectively).

Control variables

The literature review suggests that gender, age, work experience, and educational level may have an impact on voice behavior. Therefore, this study considers these four demographic variables as control variables.

Procedure

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Henan Provincial Key Laboratory of Psychology and Behavior (No. 20230110020). All participants provided appropriate informed consent to participate in this study. We used the opportunity of secondary school principals attending the training course to randomly select participants in the provincial training course for principals as representatives, and asked the principals to send the link to the test questionnaire to the teachers in their schools to answer it, and used Wenjuanxing (https://www.wjx.cn/) to collect data.

Data analysis

SPSS 21.0 and Mplus 8.3 were used for data analysis. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus 8.3 to assess discriminant validity among variables. Second, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the mediating effects. This widely adopted approach allows for the estimation of both direct and indirect effects, with bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) computed to address potential issues with statistical power stemming from non-normal sampling distributions of indirect effects (Hayes, 2013; MacKinnon et al., 2004). Bootstrapping with 5000 resamples was utilized to generate bias-corrected 95% CIs for the indirect effects.

Testing for common method bias

Due to the extensive length of the work engagement and voice behavior measures, we employed a partially disaggregated approach, known as parceling, to create indicators for latent variables, ensuring a favorable indicator-to-sample-size ratio. Previous studies have indicated that parcels yield more stable rotational results and greater reliability compared to individual items (Tang and Wen, 2020; Wu & Wen, 2011; Podsakoff et al., 2003). The resulting four-factor model demonstrated a satisfactory fit: $\chi^2 = 220.966$, $df = 71$, RMSEA $= 0.082$, SRMR $= 0.034$, CFI $= 0.961$, TLI $= 0.951$. Comparative analysis revealed that the four-factor model exhibited a significantly superior fit compared to alternative three- and one-factor models, confirming adequate discriminant validity. Additionally,

these results suggest that common method bias may not be a significant concern (see Table 1).

The result revealed that all indicators exhibited significant loadings on their respective factors. Subsequently, convergent validity and reliability were assessed using measures including the average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha (α). Convergent validity is established when the AVE values exceed 0.50 for each construct (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Reliability was evaluated with CR values exceeding the threshold of 0.60, indicating acceptability. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha (α) was employed to assess the internal consistency reliability of the observed variables in the model. According to Nunnally (1978), a coefficient α value of 0.70 or higher indicates satisfactory internal reliability.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients among the variables investigated in this study. The results reveal robust positive correlations between moral leadership and work engagement, trust in superiors, and voice behavior ($r = 0.568$, $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.772$, $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.582$, $p < 0.01$), underscoring the significance of these associations. Furthermore, work engagement exhibits significant positive correlations with trust in superiors and voice behavior ($r = 0.552$, $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.663$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, trust in superiors demonstrates a significant positive correlation with voice behavior ($r = 0.620$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting its pivotal role in fostering voice behaviors among organizational members.

Following the mediation analysis framework proposed by Wen et al., we utilized structural equation modeling to examine the mediating roles of work engagement and trust in superiors in the relationship between moral leadership and teachers' voice behaviors (Wen & Ye, 2014; Fang et al., 2014).

Moral leadership and voice behavior. Initially, we assessed the impact of moral leadership on teachers' voice behavior, resulting in a well-fitting model supported by the following fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.551$, CFI $= 0.959$, TLI $= 0.948$, RMSEA $= 0.070$, and SRMR $= 0.071$ (Bentler, 1990; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The findings revealed a significant positive association between moral leadership and teachers' voice behavior ($b = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$), thereby confirming Hypothesis 1.

Work role engagement and trust mediation

Subsequently, we examined the mediating effects of work engagement and trust in superiors, revealing a satisfactory model fit with $\chi^2/df = 2.603$, CFI $= 0.950$, TLI $= 0.940$, RMSEA $= 0.071$, and SRMR $= 0.058$, indicative of a robust model fit (Bentler, 1990; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The results, as illustrated in Figure 2, revealed that while moral leadership exhibited non-significant prediction of teacher voice behavior ($b = 0.122$, $p > 0.05$), work engagement emerged as a significant positive predictor ($b = 0.445$, $p < 0.001$), alongside trust in superiors ($b = 0.281$,

Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analyses

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
1	220.966	71		0.082	0.034	0.961	0.951
2	817.093	74	596.127**	0.179	0.128	0.809	0.765
3	1128.876	76	907.91**	0.210	0.144	0.730	0.676
4	1240.225	77	1019.250**	0.219	0.093	0.701	0.647
5	244.490	70	23.524**	0.089	0.078	0.955	0.942

Note. **$p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities

Variable	*M*	*SD*	CR	1	2	3	4
1	27.425	6.580	0.908	(0.626)			
2	44.216	8.228	0.947	0.568**	(0.855)		
3	13.683	3.449	0.904	0.772**	0.552**	(0.759)	
4	46.140	10.070	0.908	0.582**	0.663**	0.610**	(0.832)

Note. **$p < 0.01$. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation, mean variance extractions in diagonal bracket, 1: moral leadership, 2: work engagement, 3: trust in superiors, 4: voice behavior.
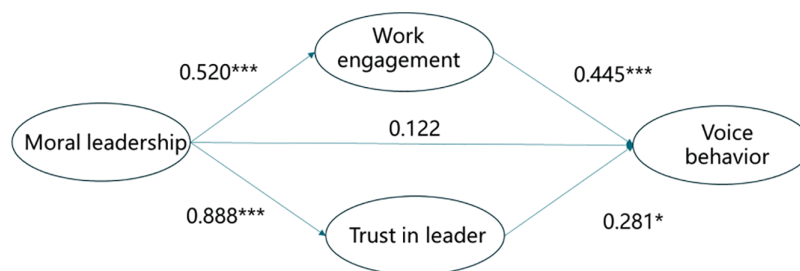
Figure 2. Path analysis results of the mediation model. *Note:* *$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 3. The indirect effects of work engagement and trust

	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	
Indirect effect 1	0.231	0.066	0.122	0.382	37.20%
Indirect effect 2	0.250	0.106	0.060	0.484	40.26%
Total indirect effect	0.481	0.105	0.283	0.698	77.46%

$p < 0.05$), underscoring their roles in shaping teachers' voice behaviors.

The outcomes of the mediation analysis unveiled a comprehensive mediating role of work engagement and trust in superiors between moral leadership and teacher voice behavior, exhibiting a total mediation effect of 0.481, representing 77.46% of the overall effect (with a direct effect of 0.122) (refer to Table 3). This mediation effect encompasses two distinct pathways: the mediating effect coefficient of work engagement between moral leadership and teachers' voice behavior stands at 0.231, with the 95% confidence interval excluding 0, indicating its significance and thus validating hypothesis 2. Similarly, the mediating effect coefficient of trust in superiors between moral leadership and teachers' voice behavior is calculated as 0.250, with the 95% confidence interval excluding 0, further affirming its significance and thereby supporting Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

The study results suggest that when school leaders exemplify traits of moral leadership, educators are more motivated to contribute meaningful ideas and recommendations, consistent with earlier research findings (Shen & Mu, 2018; Teng & Cheng, 2019). Moral leadership inspires ethical behavior among organizational members. Based on the reciprocity principle of social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017), subordinates will do more behaviors that are beneficial to the leader in return for the care and respect for subordinates shown by the virtuous leader. Consequently, when teachers perceive moral leadership within the school, they internalize moral behaviors and are motivated to actively propose suggestions, thus fostering a culture of voice engagement to drive school development.

These findings indicate that teachers' work engagement and trust in supervisors serve as mediators in the

relationship between the moral leadership of school leaders and teachers' voice behaviors. This indicates that moral leadership not only exerts a direct influence on teachers' voice behaviors but also enhances these behaviors by fostering greater work engagement and trust in leaders, enriching teachers' voice behaviors. This finding is consistent with a dual perspective by integrating both interpersonal dynamics and work-related factors.

Our findings affirm that ethical leadership shapes teachers' voice behavior by influencing their trust in the leader and engagement in work. As an ethical person and ethical leader, the moral leader focuses on being people-oriented in his interactions with subordinates, has visible ethical actions and traits, is able to practice ethical standards, and is also able to be fair and just in decision-making (Treviño et al., 2003). According to the social exchange theory, moral leaders enable subordinates to a high degree of trust in the leader of the leader's circle. The trust reduces perceived risks associated with voice behaviors, thereby stimulating proactive engagement in advocating for the organization's sustainable development (Badru, et al., 2024; Faherty and Clinton, 2024). These characteristics enable subordinates to have a high level of work engagement, fostering innovative ideas to improve existing work practices or propose effective measures to mitigate potential losses.

Implications for education practice
Teams with a good leader-member exchange relationship usually show higher morale and motivation, so subordinates will be more energetic and committed to their work. Moreover, a good leader-member exchange relationship also enables subordinates and leaders to work together to achieve common goals, so subordinates will show higher concentration and dedicate themselves to achieving a better vision. This is partly because moral leadership involves the leader's authorization of subordinates, who can get more resources from the leader (Khuntia & Suar, 2004).

The provision of ample resources energizes members, empowering them to actively contribute to organizational development through the submission of effective suggestions. When teachers perceive moral leadership from their leaders, they not only have resources to provide more suggestions but also trust their leaders. This trust reduces the perceived risks associated with their suggestions and encourages proactive participation in advancing the school.

Limitations of the study and future directions
It is important to acknowledge that all variables in this study were self-reported by teachers, which may introduce social desirability biases. Also, common reliance on self-assessment might introduce uncertainties and influence the study outcomes. To address these limitations, future research endeavors should utilize objective measures to help alleviate both social desirability and common method bias.

The study employed a convenience sample, which limits the generalizability of findings. Future research should utilize a probability sample for more dependable results.

Additionally, the use of a cross-sectional design is a limitation to any causality claims. Future investigations could consider utilizing longitudinal or experimental designs for more definitive conclusions.

Conclusion
In the current study, moral leadership was associated with the teacher's voice behavior. Work engagement and trust both play crucial roles as mediators of the relationship between moral leadership and teachers' voice behavior. These findings align with the principle of reciprocity in social exchange theory, and have implications for how to inspire teacher voice behavior for work role engagement and organizational commitment.

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Availability of Data and Materials: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval: The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Henan Provincial Key Laboratory of Psychology and Behavior (No. 20230110020). All participants provided appropriate informed consent to participate in this study.

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