

How and When Perceptions of Servant Leadership Foster Employee Work Meaningfulness

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how and when leaders foster employee work meaningfulness is theoretically and practically important. Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of servant leadership and person-environment fit, we propose that perceiving their leaders as servant leaders who put followers first would help employees fit into their job (i.e., person-job fit) and subsequently promote their work meaningfulness. Moreover, we argue that working under servant leaders who are perceived to possess high rather than low prototypicality would make employees more likely find congruence with their jobs and experience more work meaningfulness as a result. A full-time working sample from China evidenced our hypotheses. Our findings provide important contributions to extant work psychology literature and carry vital practical implications for organizations to develop employee work meaningfulness.

Cómo y cuándo la percepción del liderazgo de servicio potencia el sentido del trabajo en los empleados

RESUMEN

Entender cómo y cuándo los líderes potencian el sentido del trabajo en los empleados tiene importancia teórica y práctica. Partiendo de las bases teóricas del liderazgo de servicio y del ajuste persona-organización, proponemos que el hecho de percibir a sus líderes como líderes de servicio que ponen por delante a sus subordinados podría ayudar al ajuste de estos al puesto de trabajo (i.e., ajuste persona-puesto) y en consecuencia potenciar el sentido de su trabajo. Además, creemos que trabajar con líderes serviciales a los que se considera prototípicos hará más probable que los empleados hallen congruencia en su puesto y den en consecuencia más sentido al trabajo. Nuestra hipótesis fue probada con una muestra de trabajadores chinos a tiempo completo. Los resultados son una buena aportación a la literatura psicológica actual y conllevan implicaciones prácticas importantes para que las empresas fomenten el sentido del trabajo en los empleados.

People nowadays value the meaning of their work as much as the rewards they can obtain from work (Achor et al., 2018). Work meaningfulness, the degree to which the work is experienced as valuable and worthwhile (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), is vital not only for employee performance and well-being but also for organizational effectiveness (Fan et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2019). Previous studies revealed that individuals tend to find their work meaningful when they work in an organizational climate of openness and collaboration climate and also when they can perform tasks of significance and discretion (for reviews, see Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). Relatively scant attention has been paid to how and when leaders could develop their employees' work meaningfulness (e.g., Chaudhary, 2020; Kipfelsberger & Kark, 2018). This insufficiency is unfortunate because leaders, standing as a proximal context where

employees are embedded (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), should play an important role in crafting their employees' work meaningfulness.

Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap through the theoretical underpinnings of servant leadership and person-environment (P-E) fit. Rooted in "the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 14), servant leadership is defined as an approach to "develop employees to their fullest potential in the areas of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and future leadership capabilities" (Liden et al., 2008, p. 162). Known for the advantages of building valuable kinship and promoting organization's sustainability, it has received growing attention in the past decade (Eva et al., 2019). We contend that servant leadership enables employees to perceive fit with their jobs (i.e., person-job [P-J] fit) and subsequently find their work meaningful.

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Specifically, the P-E fit paradigm proposes that positive attitudes and behaviours result from perceptions of congruence between individual attributes and work environment (Kristof, 1996). Among different foci of the environment (e.g., job, workgroup, and organization), P-J fit was found to be most connected with job-related outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) such as work meaningfulness. It can be achieved when one's needs are met by supplies in the job and when one's knowledge, skills, and abilities fit with what the job requires (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). As servant leaders not only prioritize fulfilling followers' needs at work, but also emphasize followers' professional development for their own good (Fatima et al., 2021; Liden et al., 2015; Yagil & Oren, 2021), we expect that employees are more likely to experience P-J fit when they acknowledge their leaders as servant leaders. Moreover, employees' perceptions of fit with their jobs could lead to positive regard with themselves as well as their jobs, and encourage them to believe they can make a difference in organizations through their job (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009), all of which would facilitate employees' experience of work meaningfulness (Fan et al., 2021; Rosso et al., 2010). We therefore propose that employees' perceptions of servant leadership help craft their work meaningfulness by promoting their P-J fit.

Furthermore, emerging evidence (e.g., Steffens et al., 2020) has shown that leaders exert a greater impact on employees when they are regarded as more prototypical (i.e., representing the employees they are in charge of; Hogg, 2001). Thus, we expect prototypicality to be an important moderator of the above relationship. Specifically, the higher the prototypicality of the leader, the more likely leaders would capture employees' needs and employees would embrace what the leader suggests (Steffens et al., 2020). Accordingly, we contend that working under servant leaders who are highly prototypical, employees' perceptions of congruence with their jobs will be strengthened and subsequently more likely experience work meaningfulness. Figure 1 presents our conceptual model.

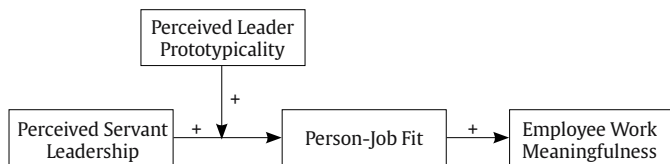


Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

Data from full-time Chinese employees in various industries validated our predictions. This study contributes to extant work psychology literature in several notable ways. First, by answering why, how, and when perceptions of servant leadership promote employee work meaningfulness, we address the inadequate inquiry on how leaders promote employees' experience of work meaningfulness (e.g., Chaudhary, 2020). Second, with P-J fit as an underlying mechanism, we add new knowledge to the generating process of work meaningfulness and enrich the theoretical foundation of servant leadership. In particular, while prior research focused on revealing how servant leaders make a difference in influencing employees' behavioural outcomes and work performance (e.g., Arain et al., 2019; Fatima et al., 2021; Lemoine & Blum, 2021; Yagil & Oren, 2021), we took a nuanced look into how they would affect employees' psychological well-being (i.e., P-J fit and work meaningfulness). Third, by identifying a boundary condition—leader prototypicality—our study further enriches the current limited understanding about when servant leaders exert more influence on employee psychological outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020). Finally, our findings also hold practical

implications for organizations to promote employees' P-J fit and their work meaningfulness.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Servant Leadership and P-J Fit

Leaders affect employees' perceptions of fit with their jobs (Boon & Biron, 2016). Practicing an other-oriented approach in management, servant leaders show empathy and care for followers' professional and personal growth (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008). We argue that servant leadership will facilitate employees' perceptions of fitting into their jobs in at least two ways.

First, employees led by servant leaders will find their needs met by their jobs. Since servant leaders, as mentioned before, put employees first and show genuine concern for them (Greenleaf, 1977), they would construct a working environment tailored to employees (Liden et al., 2008). They even may rule out ineffective work policies or practices for the best of employees (Ehrhart, 2004). While helping employees to craft their jobs has been proved to increase employee P-J fit (Verelst et al., 2021), servant leaders "create" jobs for employees that lead to more P-J fit. Moreover, leaders' focus on serving should boost employees' trust in management and commitment (e.g., Kauppila et al., 2022; Rai & Prakash, 2016), which would reduce employees' fear of communicating with leader about issues such as what they really need for better task performance. Servant leaders thus have higher chance to understand and meet employees' needs and subsequently increase employee P-J fit.

Second, servant leaders often offer opportunities to help employees grow in task effectiveness and self-motivation (Greenleaf, 1977), which are essential for employees to perform their jobs better. For example, servant leaders might offer challenging tasks to enhance their abilities and skills (Liden et al., 2008) and encourage them to reflect on their performance (Wang et al., 2021; Yagil & Oren, 2021). They also help employees establish relational connections at work (Fatima et al., 2021; van Dierendonck, 2011) and empower employees to bring out the best of themselves (Greenleaf, 1977; Yang et al., 2019). As such, the enhanced knowledge, skills, abilities, work connections, and motivations should enable employees to meet their job demands and thereby perceive fit with their jobs. Accordingly, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Employees' perceptions of servant leadership correlate positively with their P-J fit.

The Mediating Role of P-J Fit

P-E paradigm has established that fit perception is critical to one's positive experience at work such as job satisfaction and work engagement (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Likewise, work meaningfulness has always been recognized as a kind of positive work experience (Achor et al., 2018). Building on the P-E paradigm and work meaningfulness literature, we contend that those who experience P-J fit under perceived servant leadership would further find their work meaningful.

Individuals may find positive meaning in work when they are able to show the best of their abilities (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). Perceiving fit with their jobs, employees are aware of how to perform tasks at best with their expertise (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009) and thus should consider their work as meaningful. Moreover, employees who perceive P-J fit tend to express the true selves at work (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009), which would also foster their sense of work meaningfulness (Steger et al., 2012).

Combining the arguments above, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: P-J fit mediates the positive relationship between employees' perceptions of servant leadership and their work meaningfulness.

The Moderating Role of Leader Prototypicality

As the growing body of research demonstrates that leaders' representativeness of employees in terms of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and feelings (i.e., leader prototypicality; Hogg, 2001) can sway leaders' impact on their employees (van Knippenberg, 2011), we further expect leader prototypicality to moderate the above relationship. Compared with low prototypical leaders, high prototypical leaders are more influential in the management such that employees display stronger support to them (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008). We thereby argue that employees will more likely perceive fit with their jobs under servant leaders who are high prototypical also for two reasons.

First, servant leaders in high prototypicality locate and fulfil their employees' needs more precisely. Since high prototypical leaders share the interest and values with their employees (van Knippenberg, 2011), they should have a sharper sense of what employees really need. Accordingly, it is easier for servant leaders in high prototypicality to craft the work context suitable for their employees. Second, servant leaders in high prototypicality will more likely develop their employees. When leaders are highly prototypical, they are more socially attractive to their employees and more easily win trust from them (Hogg, 2001). In this case, employees should be more attentive to those provided by servant leaders and would also take leaders' expectations (e.g., the realization of employees' full potential) more seriously (Gerpott et al., 2019), which should inspire them to meet the job requirement and perceive P-J fit.

Contrarily, servant leaders in low prototypicality might have difficulty in understanding employees' needs and are less socially attracted to their employees in that they have less in common with them (van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). The likelihood for employees to experience P-J fit under these leaders would be lower. Thus, we posit:

Hypothesis 3: Employees' perceptions of leader prototypicality moderate the relationship between their perceptions of servant leadership and P-J fit, such that the positive impact of perceived servant leadership on P-J fit is stronger when employees perceive the leader as high rather than low prototypicality.

Thus far, we have constructed the mediating effect of P-J fit underlying the relationship between perceived servant leadership and employee work meaningfulness and the moderating role of perceived leader prototypicality in the relationship between perceived servant leadership and employee P-J fit. We further propose that employees working under servant leaders in high perceived prototypicality would more likely feel fit with their jobs and subsequently possess more work meaningfulness.

Hypothesis 4: Employees' perceptions of leader prototypicality moderate the indirect relationship between their perceptions

of servant leadership and work meaningfulness through P-J fit, such that this positive indirect effect is stronger when employees perceive the leader as high rather than low prototypicality.

Method

Sample and Procedures

We collected data through personal networks, from 215 full-time employees working in various Chinese industries. Initially, we delivered our questionnaires to 221 employees. We assured them of confidentiality and anonymity when introducing the survey and emphasized the importance of integrity during the process. Six responses that failed our attention check item were excluded, resulting in a response rate of 97.29%.

Among the final sample, 102 (47.44%) were female and 144 (66.98%) were aged between 18 and 25. Most of the participants (83.26%) held their jobs for less than 3 years. Participants held positions ranging from employees (63.26%), first-line managers (22.79%), middle-level managers (10.70%), and top managers (3.26%). In addition, nearly half of the participants (47.91%) held a college degree or above.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of Jinan University's Research Committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this article.

Measures

Following Brislin's (1980) back-translation procedure, we developed the Chinese questionnaires of our study. Respondents rated the study measures on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Servant leadership perceptions were assessed with a 7-item scale developed by Liden et al. (2015). One sample item was "My leader can tell if something work-related is going wrong". Cronbach's α was .79.

Person-job fit was captured using a 5-item scale developed by Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001). A sample item was "My abilities fit the demands of this job". Cronbach's α was .82.

Work meaningfulness was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Steger et al. (2012). One sample item was "I have found a meaningful career". Cronbach's α was .85.

Leader prototypicality perceptions were assessed by the 5-item scale developed by van Knippenberg and van Knippenberg (2005). A

Table 1. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of the Measurement Models

Models	χ^2 (df)	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	SRMR	CFI	TLI
4-factor model (study model)	79.11 (48)***	-	.04	.97	.97
3-factor model 1 ¹	141.90 (51)***	62.79 (3)***	.05	.93	.90
3-factor model 2 ²	235.99 (51)***	156.88 (3)***	.08	.85	.80
2-factor model 1 ³	349.96 (53)***	270.85(5)***	.10	.75	.69
2-factor model 2 ⁴	299.07 (53)***	219.96(5)***	.08	.80	.75
1-factor model ⁵	394.99 (54)***	315.88(6)***	.10	.72	.66

Note. Chi-square difference tests were conducted between the baseline model and each alternative model.

¹In the 3-factor Model 1, items of perceived servant leadership and perceived leader prototypicality were loaded on one factor.

²In the 3-factor Model 2, items of work meaningfulness and person-job fit were loaded on one factor.

³In the 2-factor Model 1, items of perceived servant leadership, person-job fit and work meaningfulness were loaded on one factor.

⁴In the 2-factor Model 2, items of perceived servant leadership and perceived leader prototypicality, person-job fit and work meaningfulness were respectively loaded on one factor.

⁵In the 1-factor Model, all items were loaded on one factor.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Construct Means, SDs, Reliabilities, and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Perceived servant leadership	3.24	0.80	.79							
2. Person-job fit	3.79	0.75	.27**	.82						
3. Work meaningfulness	3.55	0.76	.48**	.43**	.85					
4. Perceived leader prototypicality	3.60	0.88	.60**	.038**	.62**	.84				
Control variables										
5. Gender ¹	.47	.50	-.21	.10	.16	-.00	-			
6. Age ²	1.47	0.79	-.20	.12	.05	-.03	.09	-		
7. Tenure ³	1.87	0.94	.00	.91	.10	-.06	-.01	.48**	-	
8. Position ⁴	1.54	0.81	.06	.07	.08	-.08	-.17	.17	.26**	-

Note. *n* = 215. Reliability coefficients are reported on the diagonal.

¹In two categories (0 = male, 1 = female).

²In four categories (1 = 25 years and below, 2 = 26-30 years, 3 = 31-40 years, 4 = 41 years and above).

³In five levels (1 = 1 years and below, 2 = 1-3 years, 3 = 4-6 years, 4 = 7-9 years, 5 = 10 years and above).

⁴In four levels (1 = employee, 2 = first-line manager, 3 = middle-level manager, 4 = top manager).

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

sample item read “This team leader is a good example of the kind of people that are members of my team”. Cronbach’s α was .84.

As previous research (e.g., Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) suggest that age, gender, position, and tenure would influence individual perception of congruence with their jobs and performing meaningful work, we controlled for these demographic variables in our analyses.

Results

Measurement Model

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in Mplus 7 to assess the validity of our study constructs and our study model. Results are shown in Table 1. To maintain a favorable indicator-to-sample-size ratio (Little et al., 2013), we created item parcels for each variable. Results demonstrate that the four-factor measurement model had a better fit with the observed data ($\chi^2 = 79.11, df = 48, p < .01$; comparative fit index [CFI] = .90; Tucker-Lewis index [TLI] = .97; standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = .04) than the one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 394.99, df = 54, p < .01$; CFI = .72; TLI = .66; SRMR = .10) and other competitive models (see Table 1). Overall, these results suggest that respondents could distinguish the focal constructs well.

Descriptive Statistical Analyses

Table 2 presents the means, SDs, reliabilities, and correlation estimates of all variables in our study. Because results in Table 2 indicated that gender, age, tenure, and position were significantly

correlated neither with P-J fit nor work meaningfulness, we did not control the demographical variables in the following analyses.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 3 displays a summary of the linear regression results analyzed in SPSS 25.0. Results of Model 1 show that the positive relationship of perceived servant leadership and employee P-J fit was significant ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 proposes the mediating effect of P-J fit. When perceived servant leadership and P-J fit were both entered into the model, results of Model 4 indicated that P-J fit was significantly related to work meaningfulness ($\beta = .44, p < .001$). We next performed Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS macro program (Model 4) to construct 95% confidence intervals (CIs) (number of bootstrap samples = 5,000). The result verified our prediction on the mediation (effect: .09, bootSE = .04, CI [.03, .17]). Thus, Hypothesis 2 received support.

Hypothesis 3 posits that the positive effect of perceived servant leadership on P-J fit is strengthened in high rather than low perceived leader prototypicality. As is showed in Model 3, the interaction of perceived servant leadership and perceived leader prototypicality was significant ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), providing initial support for Hypothesis 3. Following Aiken and West’s (1991) procedures, we then plotted the interaction effect (see Figure 2) and conducted simple slope tests to examine the nature of the interaction. The pattern indicates that the positive relationship between perceived servant leadership and P-J fit was significant only in high perceived prototypicality ($t = 2.89, p < .001, 1 SD$ above the mean) rather than low perceived prototypicality ($t = 1.50, ns, 1 SD$ below the mean). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Table 3. Regression Results

Dependent variables	Person-Job Fit				Work Meaningfulness			
	Model1 (SE)	Model2 (SE)	Model3 (SE)	Model4 (SE)	Model5 (SE)	Model6 (SE)	Model7 (SE)	
Intercepts	3.79*** (.05)	3.79*** (.05)	3.68*** (.07)	1.91*** (.24)	2.31*** (.23)	2.70*** (.21)	2.74*** (.22)	
Independent variable								
Perceived servant leadership	.25*** (.06)	.06 (.08)	.01 (.07)		.38*** (.06)	.15* (.06)	.14* (.06)	
Person-job fit				.44*** (.06)	.33*** (.06)	.23*** (.06)	.21*** (.06)	
Perceived leader prototypicality		.29*** (.07)	.36*** (.07)			.38*** (.06)	.40*** (.06)	
Interaction								
Perceived servant leadership Perceived leader prototypicality			.25*** (.06)				.04 (.05)	
R ²	.07***	.14***	.22***	.19***	.34***	.45***	.45***	
ΔR^2	.07***	.07***	.08***	.19***	.15***	.12***	.00	

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

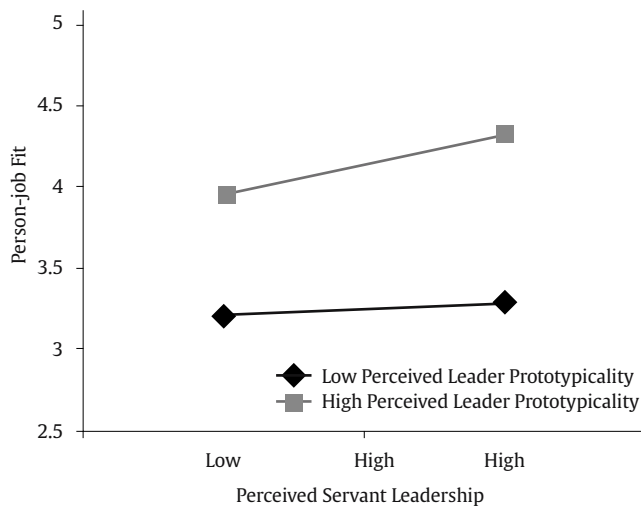


Figure 2. The Moderating Effect of Perceived Leader Prototypicality on the Relationship between Perceived Servant Leadership and Person-Job Fit.

Finally, we used Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro program (Model 7) to obtain bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effect (i.e., Hypothesis 4). As a result, the moderated mediation model was validated ($\gamma = .10$, $SE = .03$, $CI [.04, .16]$). Furthermore, simple slope analyses showed the indirect effect of perceived servant leadership on employee work meaningfulness through P-J fit was significant when leaders were perceived as high prototypical ($t = 3.01$, $p < .001$, 1 SD above the mean) but insignificant when leaders were perceived as low prototypical ($t = -1.51$, ns , 1 SD below the mean). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was also supported.

Additionally, since we collected data with self-report questionnaires at one time, we checked the influence of common method variance (CMV) in the analysis. We ran Harman's single factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2012) and the result revealed the first factor accounted for 32.44%, lower than the cut-off suggested 35% suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). This implies CMV should not be a major problem in our study.

Discussion

Answering how and when leaders can promote employee work meaningfulness is theoretically and practically meaningful. Based on the P-E fit theory, we found support for the positive effect of perceived servant leadership on employees' P-J fit. And P-J fit was found to explain how perceived servant leadership could enhance employees' experience work meaningfulness. Furthermore, our results also indicated that the benefits of perceived servant leadership were stronger only when leaders were regarded as high rather than low prototypical.

Theoretical Implications

Our study contributes to extant work psychology literature in three ways. First, this research adds to the body of research on work meaningfulness by examining how and when perceptions of servant leadership affect work meaningfulness. Although previous studies found the direct influence of leaders towards employees' work meaningfulness (e.g., Fan et al., 2021; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020; Wang & Xu, 2019), seldom did they investigate the mediating mechanism underneath. Our results thus go beyond existing studies by showing how and when perceptions of servant leadership would shape employees' work meaningfulness. Our findings also imply that the function of leaders on employees' work meaningfulness could be implicit and more complicated.

Second, prior research was mostly based on theoretical lens of social information processing, social exchange, social power, and self-motivation (Eva et al., 2019; Fatima et al., 2021; Yagil & Oren, 2021) to reveal the impact of servant leaders on employees. Our adoption of P-J fit to unveil the psychological mechanism through which employees' perceptions of servant leadership was transmitted into their sense of work meaningfulness, thus enriching the existing theoretical foundation of servant leadership. Meanwhile, accumulated knowledge has been known about how servant leaders influence employees' behavioural outcomes and work performance (e.g., Arain et al., 2019; Fatima et al., 2021; Lemoine & Blum, 2021; Yagil & Oren, 2021). Our findings on their positive impact on employees' P-J fit and work meaningfulness thus add to our limited knowledge about how perceptions of servant leadership should affect employees' psychological well-being (Eva et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020).

Third, our findings uncovered a boundary condition that may sway the beneficial effect of perceptions of servant leadership on employees. Extant studies mainly proposed employees' self-perception and coworker recognition as moderators interacting with leader behaviours to influence employees' experience of work meaningfulness (e.g., Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). Nevertheless, employees' attitudes towards leaders should also affect the impact of the advantage of servant leadership, albeit widely agreed, relies on the extent to which employees accept their leaders as one of them (i.e., prototypicality). These findings also contribute new knowledge to extant servant leadership literature (Eva et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020).

Practical Implications

Our research offers some useful implications for organizations to increase their employees' sense of work meaningfulness. First, considering the positive effect of perceived servant leadership on P-J fit along with work meaningfulness, we recommend leaders to engage in serving behaviors like providing positive feedback, support, and encouragement for employees to grow at work (Liden et al., 2015). In particular, in view of the moderating effect of perceived prototypicality, leaders should be aware that they can exert more influence on their employees when they are regarded as more prototypical by their workgroups. Moreover, human resource management department should establish training projects to improve leaders' serving abilities (e.g., higher moral standards and emotional intelligence) (e.g., Liden et al., 2008) and prototypicality (van Knippenberg, 2011).

Second, considering the mediating effect of P-J fit underlying the positive relationship between perceived servant leadership and employee work meaningfulness, human resource management department should recruit employees who are fit with their specific jobs. Moreover, supervisors should assess their employees' abilities and needs from time to time and intervene to redesign jobs when necessary (Verelst et al., 2021). Furthermore, to enhance fit with their jobs, employees should also proactively communicate their needs with supervisors and engage in various forms of job crafting (Tims et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our research is subject to several limitations that should be noted for future research. First, since our data was cross-sectional, our findings should be taken with caution. To draw conclusions regarding causality, future research can use an experimental design to manipulate the levels of perceived servant leadership (e.g., Wu et al., 2018) to validate our findings or adopt a longitudinal design to trace the impact of servant leaders on employees.

Second, this study was conducted only in a Chinese setting, which is culturally characterized by collectivism, high power distance, and

long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001, 2011). We think that the impact of perceived servant leadership found in our study might be different in populations who hold different cultural orientations. For example, compared with high-power-distance employees who generally accept the unequal power distribution, those who work in low power distance culture should prefer more equal treatment from their leaders (Daniels & Greguras, 2014; Schaubroeck et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2021). As servant leaders put followers' needs first and empower them (Greenleaf, 1977; Newman et al., 2017), we consider that the positive effects of perceived servant leadership on employee P-J fit and work meaningfulness found in our study might be stronger for employees from low-power-distance countries. Moreover, the beneficial effects of servant leadership (such as developing people) might take time to manifest (Lee et al., 2020). As such, employees from countries with short-term orientation might less appreciate servant leaders and therefore be less likely to make good use of what servant leaders provide for finding fit with and meaningfulness in their jobs. Furthermore, as employees coming from individualistic culture care more about self-worth and personal development (Davis et al., 1997), they might be particularly benefited from servant leaders who prioritize employees' interests and needs. Accordingly, the positive impact of perceptions of servant leadership could be stronger for employees from individualistic countries. To validate and generalize our findings, we highly recommend future research to replicate our study in other countries or regions with different cultures.

In addition, since our finding demonstrated a partial mediating role of P-J fit, future research can explore other mediating mechanisms to further understand how perceived servant leadership can affect employees' experience of work meaningfulness. For instance, as servant leaders are interested in figuring out the inner needs and interests of their employees (Eva et al., 2019), employees under this kind of leaders may thus have a clearer and more coherent sense of themselves (i.e., self-concept clarity; Campbell et al., 1996), which is also relevant for shaping their work meaningfulness (Oh & Roh, 2019). Finally, although leader prototypicality was found to be a crucial moderator in this study, previous research also suggest that leader prototypicality only works when employees also identify with the group they belong to (Ullrich et al., 2009). Therefore, future research might utilize a multi-level perspective to find out how the factors of leader, group, and individuals interact to impact employees' perceptions of P-J fit and work meaningfulness.

Conclusion

Work meaningfulness nowadays should matter more than material incentives to motivate employees in the long run. Our findings suggest that perceived servant leadership can promote employees' fit with their jobs and subsequently foster their work meaningfulness, especially when these leaders are seen as prototypical by their employees. Our findings indicate that organizations could enhance employees' experience of P-J fit and work meaningfulness by cultivating servant leaders who are perceived to embody the employees. We encourage more research to delve into the role of leaders in promoting employees' experience of work meaningfulness.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

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