

The nexus of servant leadership and project success: the mediation of emotional intelligence and job stress and moderation of team effectiveness

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigated the impact of servant leadership on project success in nongovernment organizations (NGOs) working in a developing country like Pakistan. A moderated mediation design was employed, and the mediating role of employees' emotional intelligence (EI) and job stress (JS) was tested between servant leadership on project success. Moreover, the study also examined the moderating role of team effectiveness.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 441 project team members working on different developed projects. Data were analyzed using partial least square-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique.

Findings – Results revealed that servant leadership exerts a significant positive impact on project success. Also, it is noted that servant leadership significantly increases the employee's emotional intelligence that contributes to project success although it does not reduce JS. However, JS was found to be a significant mediator in the association between servant leadership on project success. The findings also revealed that team effect plays an imperative moderating role in ensuring project success.

Originality/value – The study is one of the very few studies conducted to assess the impact of servant leadership on project success in not-for-profit organizations. The study contributes to the literature and methodology by adopting a holistic approach to investigate the mediation of EI and JS along with the moderation of team effectiveness in the nexus of servant leadership and project success.

Keywords Project success (PS), Servant leadership (SL), Emotional intelligence (EI), Job stress (JS), Team effectiveness (TE)

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Project success (PS), being an important issue of project management, has grabbed substantial attention of researchers, practitioners and media in the recent times (Aga *et al.*, 2016; Wu *et al.*, 2017; Raziq *et al.*, 2018; Rezvani *et al.*, 2018). Non-government organizations (NGOs), being project-based organizations, are especially concerned about the success of their



projects as these projects usually pertain the community development goals. Literature reveals that the previous studies on PS have considered several factors like project governance (Joslin and Müller, 2016; Ul Musawir *et al.*, 2017), leadership styles and resources, among others, imperative to the success of community projects (Taherdoost and Keshavarzsaheh, 2016; Maqbool *et al.*, 2017). Out of all these factors, numerous authors have noted the key role of leadership in the process of project management as it affects each phase of the project cycle (Pinto and Slevin, 1988; Shenhar *et al.*, 2002; Müller and Turner, 2010). Many studies have found that leadership style has an important connection with PS (Aga *et al.*, 2016; Raziq *et al.*, 2018; Lam and O'Higgins, 2012). However, the majority of studies investigating the leadership–project management link have focused on transformational leadership style, while the focus on the role of other leadership styles on project managers towards PS has mainly been neglected. This creates the need, space and motivation for investigating the influence of other leadership styles on PS.

According to Brière *et al.* (2015), human aspects, such as adaptability, knowledge communication and collaboration skills, leadership practices, interactive skills, norms and ethics, situational awareness and change management, are the key to the success of multinational NGO projects, shedding light on the importance of keeping the project members satisfied and motivated. Servant leadership (SL) is an emerging leadership style that focuses mainly on the satisfaction and motivation of the followers more than their job responsibility (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden *et al.*, 2008) and is composed of facets like the growth of people, maintenance, development of the community and qualities that compliment the success of NGO projects. Moreover, the use of SL as an antecedent serves to fill an inconsistent literature gap as the nexus between SL and PS is still an underdeveloped theory that requires further investigation (Liden *et al.*, 2008, 2014; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2011; Lee, 2018).

Besides, job stress (JS) is also found to have an impact on important project outcomes as it negatively affects performances, communications, productivity, absenteeism and job commitment of individuals and groups. By following this analogy, an increase or decrease in JS is considered a direct outcome of the leadership style that has an obvious association with PS (Sumaryo *et al.*, 2015; Dartey-Baah and Ampofo, 2015). It is noted that emotional intelligence (EI) and JS separately exert a significant impact on PS and their impact has been ascertained in studies using various different leadership styles (Cavazotte *et al.*, 2012; Khalili, 2012; Petrovici and Dobrescu, 2014).

According to the situational strength theory (SST) (Meyer *et al.*, 2009), every situation is heterogeneous to other situations, and the outcomes are contingent upon the situation strength. Meyer *et al.* (2010) describe situational strength as “implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities regarding the desirability of potential behaviors”. NGOs are team-based organization, and team effectiveness (TE) is often discussed as a significant contextual contributor; whenever studies pertaining to project management are conducted, it has been found to majorly contribute towards PS (Kwofie *et al.*, 2015). Thus, in addition to the above mediations, the current study also emphasizes the moderating effect of TE and explains how it externally affects the relationship between follower's EI and JS on PS.

The study contributes in several ways. The study is one of the very few studies to assess the impact of SL on PS in not-for-profit organization. Second, by examining the impact of the SL on PS in non-profit organizations of Pakistan contributes to the scarce literature on SL and project success in the context of Pakistan (Martens and Carvalho, 2017; Carvalho and Rabechini, 2017). Aside from the scarcity of such studies in Pakistani context, this incongruence can also be attributed to the unique cultural values of the country. Ranking high on the collectivism score (Hofstede, 1984), there are reciprocal expectations of being cared about on part of both leaders and followers in such culture. Hence, employees in such culture are greatly influenced by the leader that gives special attention to their personal satisfaction and motivation, elements that are extremely imperative to SL. Third, it also

contributes to the literature and methodology by adopting a holistic approach to investigate the mediation of EI and JS along with the moderation of TE in the nexus of SL and PS.

Project success

A project is defined as a venture set up to achieve a specific outcome within the prescribed time and allocated resources (Rose, 2013). PS is defined and measured in a variety of dimensions, and it cannot be constrained to a single aspect (Ika *et al.*, 2012; Khang and Moe, 2008). Rezvani *et al.* (2016) measured the success of a project as its timely completion with good quality and low cost. Samáková *et al.* (2013) ascertain that achieving the project's primary goals through utilizing and accommodating the project team is a measure of project success. Regarding NGOs, PS is the ability to develop effective solutions for local problems or issues of the society (Kealey *et al.*, 2005) with scarce funds. Diallo and Thuillier (2005) argued that communication and trust are important factors for PS in NGO projects. Brière *et al.* (2015) identified several key factors critical for PS in the context of multinational NGOs projects. These factors included human aspects such as adaptability, knowledge communication and collaboration skills, leadership practices, interactive skills, norms and ethics, situational awareness and change management. Ahmed and Tinne (2017) argued that engagement with the local community and relationship with local corporations are critical for effective implementation and perusal of a project and its sustainability. In short, PS has many definitions and explanations, which may vary from author to author or region to region (Ulleberg, 2009).

Servant leadership and project success

The concept of SL was first introduced by Greenleaf (1970), defining SL as follower-centered approach that works for the satisfaction of subordinates' needs ahead of other responsibilities (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden *et al.*, 2008). Greenleaf (1977) who presented SL theory described three basic facets of SL, i.e. the growth of people, maintenance and development of the community. In the challenging environment of NGOs, strong leadership is vital for motivating and empowering project teams (Eva *et al.*, 2018). Effective leadership may increase acceptance of an NGO among its different stakeholders, such as the community, local bodies, donor agencies and government (Yousaf, 2018). Also, it assists in project implementation, promoting sustainability, forming effective relationships and improving the quality of services (Singh, 2014). Given that SL is an appropriate style that increases the level of satisfaction motivation, and commitment of the followers (Spears, 1998), it is compatible with the vision and mission of NGOs (Parris and Peachey, 2013). Therefore, organizations like NGOs may adopt SL for accomplishing stability between the worklife of employees and shared perspective of community needs, which can nurture an organization by a true sense of membership and humanity (Singh, 2014) leading to greater probability for the success of the projects run by such NGOs. Previous studies also confirm this notion. Kumar (2013), in the context of a developing country, declared NGOs as the best set up for practicing SL. Likewise, Awan (2012) also noted that SL increasing the motivation of the project team improves its performance in NGOs in Pakistan. Oyawa *et al.* (2014) examined SL in Kenya's project management context and reported a correlation between SL and PS while considering the project team's needs and growth. Yousaf's (2018) study in Pakistan also found a similar positive correlation between SL and PS. In the light of these studies, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. SL has a significant positive impact on PS.

Mediating role of emotional intelligence

EI is the ability of individuals to understand and positively use their emotions for themselves, others and the organizations they serve (Emmerling and Goleman, 2005). Salovey and Mayer (1990) described EI as a psychological ability responsible for effective handling of one's own

and others' emotions. In the context of social learning theory, EI could be linked to the SL (Bandura and McClelland, 1977). The social learning theory assumes that individuals' approach or behavior is changed by observing the behavior of others or learning from them. The theory deals with a social learning and cognitive progression in one's personality who first observe, perceive and then imitate before finally adapting or adopting the habits or behaviors of others.

Studies suggest a number of commonalities between SL and EI like empathy, trust and the ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships with others in the society and organizations (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) through long-lasting positive relationship between them (Sendjaya and Pekerti, 2010). Thus in the context of a project, we argue that the presence of SL would enable the follower to build confidence in their work and would also enable the development of a positive work environment (Eva *et al.*, 2018; Liden *et al.*, 2008). This in turn would ignite the social learning process in followers where they would also start developing EI by noticing and ultimately adapting those habits and behaviors of their SL (Woodward, 1982).

It is suggested that due to better understanding of their surrounding emotions and high level of confidence (Sendjaya and Pekerti, 2010), individuals with high EI maintain good relationships with both the leadership and colleagues (Du Plessis *et al.*, 2015). This among others things not only uplift the collective decision-making but also improve their trust-based relationship among management and other team members (Lindebaum and Jordan, 2012; Maqbool *et al.*, 2017; Rezvani *et al.*, 2018). This positivity in the environment pushes the project team to make intense efforts to assure the success of the project. Thus, it is hypothesized that

H2. SL has a significant positive impact on EI.

H3. EI has a significant positive impact on PS.

H4. EI has a significant positive mediating role between SL and PS.

The mediating role of job stress

JS is the negative outcome or reaction of individuals due to undue pressure or work demands on them. LePine *et al.* (2004) define stress as a person's negative feelings for others in their surrounding or their inability due to lack of resources to avoid or reduce the tension/risk of others in the surrounding. It is important for a leader not only to know their followers well but also to recognize their differences for reducing JS among them (Cummins, 1990). JS among employees may lead to negative emotions and behaviors that consequently affect their performance. A decrease in JS may contribute to job satisfaction, work performance, TE etc. (Santhapparaj and Alam, 2005; Baloch, 2009) which have positive effects on PS. Following the assumptions of conservation of resources (CoR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), SL could be assumed as an important resource to project members, the loss of which may lead to an increase in JS. Further, the theory posits that the increase in JS leads to manifestation of negative emotion and behaviors among individuals leading to loss of performance (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). In context of the current study, SL may serve to mitigate the negative consequences of JS and amplify positive outcomes (Eva *et al.*, 2018) towards PS. Thus, it is hypothesized that

H5. SL has a significant negative impact on JS.

H6. JS has a significant negative impact on PS.

H7. JS has a significant mediating role between SL and PS.

Moderating role of team effectiveness

Gladstein (1984) explained TE as a satisfactory performance of the team, while Cohen and Bailey (1997) defined TE as a cumulative measure of high performance and quality of work.

In short, a team is effective when it achieves its desired objectives (Latif and Williams, 2017). Based on SST theory, this study theorizes TE as a moderator on the impact of both EI and JS on PS. TE is characterized by satisfactory high performance on part of the team member logically suggesting higher chances of PS (Kwofie *et al.*, 2015). However, as per the SST theory, when working as a moderator, the TE would contextually interact with EI and JS, thereby influencing their impact on PS.

Initially, interaction of EI with TE would lead to an enhancement in PS because the confidence of high EI worker would further be bolstered by the highly function positive unity among team member due to high TE. This would enhance the efforts of team members towards PS as they would be internally and externally motivated to make the projects successful by EI and TE, respectively.

On the other hand, the contextual influence of TE on the JS-PS relationship would act as a buffer in that scenario. This is because the positive cohesion among the team member due to TE would act to diminish the JS in individuals, thus reversing the impact and increases the chances of PS. Hence, the following hypotheses for further investigation are proposed (see Figure 1):

H8. TE has a significant moderating impact on the relationship between EI and PS.

H9. TE has a significant moderating impact on the relationship between JS and PS.

Research methodology

Data collection

This research employed a quantitative cross-sectional research approach. The data were collected through a survey questionnaire method that is widely used for data collection in similar studies (Leedy and Ormrod, 2012). The population of the study comprised project team members. Data were collected from the NGOs located in the city of Lahore and Peshawar, Pakistan, and a convenience sampling technique was used to approach the

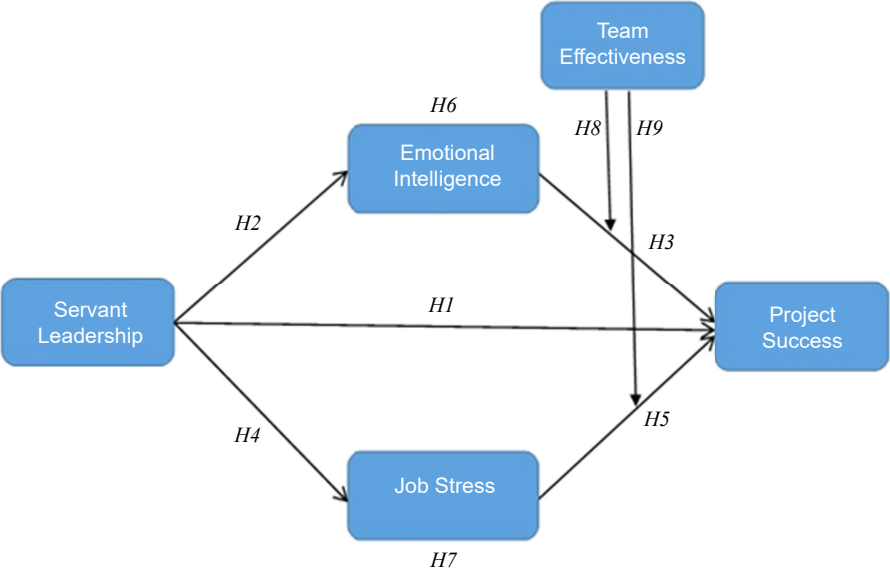


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

respondent either directly or through their team leaders. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed among different project team members. Out of 530 distributed survey questionnaires, 450 were returned. After the initial screening, incomplete responses were eliminated, and finally, 441 responses were used for analysis, giving a response rate of 83%. The study had minimal researchers' interference as it captured real-time behavioral perceptions of project team members. Following the research ethics (Kvale, 1996), an informed consent was taken from the participants and their responses were kept anonymous to ensure impartiality in responses.

Measures

Standardized scales were used to measure all the study variables. To measure SL, a seven-item global SL measure was adopted from Liden *et al.* (2015). For measuring JS of the team members, the study employed a scale used by Jamal and Baba (1997), which was initially developed by Parker and DeCotiis (1983) and consisted of nine items. For measuring EI, a 16-item Wong and Law's EI Scale (2002) (WLEIS) was used. The WLEIS was developed based on Salovey and Mayer (1990) work that is considered the crux of the EI theory. PS was measured through a scale adopted from Wu *et al.* (2017) and consisted of 11 items. Finally, TE was measured with an 11 item scale adopted from Maynard *et al.* (2012).

Data analysis and results

The study employed variance-based structural equation modeling (SEM) technique using the smart-partial least square (PLS) software.

Measurement model

In the measurement model, the outer loadings of the latent variable ranged from 0.596 to 0.876. Only one item had a factor loading of 0.596 which was marginally close to 0.6 whereas all other item loadings were above 0.6. To make sure the composite reliability (CR) values are above the set criteria, some of the items with lower loadings were deleted, and the remaining items in the model were used for further analysis. The CR values in this study were above the cut-off value of 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2014) ranging from 0.809 to 0.905. The Cronbach alpha that is also considered a most common measure of scale reliability (Henseler, 2010) requires an alpha value of above 0.7 for the reliability of the scale. However, the values in the range of 0.5–0.6 for Cronbach alpha are also considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1970). The alpha coefficient values were above 0.8 ensuring high reliability for all except the alpha value of SL that was 0.685, but being marginally close to 0.7 (Maqbool *et al.*, 2017), it was considered acceptable. To assess the convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) was observed to be above the cut-off criteria of 0.5 in a range from 0.514 to 0.676. Table 1 shows the CR, Cronbach alpha and AVE values of this study variables.

For measuring discriminant validity, heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio was used. All values below the cut-off criteria of 0.9 provided evidence for no collinearity (Maqbool *et al.*, 2017). The HTMT ratios are reported in Table 2.

Structural model

H1 and H2 of the study aimed at examining the direct impact of SL on PS and EI, respectively. Statistical results provided support for both the hypotheses, and as proposed, a positive effect of SL was found on both PS ($\beta = 0.16$, $t = 2.72$ and $p = 0.007$) and EI ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 8.475$ and $p < 0.001$). Similarly, H3 examined the impact of EI on PS. The results also supported H3, and a positive impact of EI on PS ($\beta = 0.13$, $t = 2.087$ and $p = 0.037$) was found. H4 was established to examine the negative impact of SL on JS. The results did not provide any

Table 1.
Reliability analysis of
constructs with
convergent validity

Table 2.
Discriminant validity
using HTMT ratio

The study intended to examine the mediating role of EI and JS between SL and PS in H6 and H7 of the study, respectively. Results provide support for H6, as the mediating role of EI ($\beta = 0.05$, $t = 1.991$, and $p = 0.047$) was found statistically significant; however, H7 was not supported as the mediation of JS ($\beta = 0.00$, $t = 0.564$ and $p = 0.573$) was not found. Lastly, H8 and H9 were developed to investigate the moderating role of TE on the impact of EI on PS and JS on PS, respectively. The results did not provide any evidence to support H8, as the moderating role of TE was found to be nonsignificant on the impact of EI on PS ($\beta = -0.141$,

explanation that if SL pays attention to the legitimate needs of the project team members, it increases their commitment and motivation that have positive implications for PS (Oyawa *et al.*, 2014; Krog and Govender, 2015). Besides, the findings may also explain that SL being closer to subordinates and thus to the community, get quick feedback that contributes to the success of community-based projects of NGOs. Given these, it is concluded that SL contributes to PS by improving the performance of the subordinates or project teams. Hence, based on these findings, this study recommends SL for PS in NGOs where the environment is more dynamic and challenging that requires robust decision-making.

SL was also found to be a significant positive predictor of EI in the context of Pakistani NGOs. This explains that a high level of SL would inculcate EI in project team members. These findings have an explanation that SL influences their followers in an inspirational and effective way which fosters trust and confidence among them. On the other hand, individuals having a high value of EI maintain trustworthy relationships as they understand, empathize and support each other in a better way (Du Plessis *et al.*, 2015). The findings confirm that SL nurtures emotionally intelligent team members through better communication, empathy and mutual understanding. Project management requires teams to work collaboratively with each other, and NGOs usually have various project teams for longer periods; hence based on the findings of the current study, SL is recommended for increasing the level of understanding, effective communication and better working relationship with each other. The findings are significant since to the best of the authors' knowledge, there is no study to date that has empirically tested SL as an antecedent of EI of followers.

Next, the statistical impact of EI on PS was found, which shows that a higher level of EI of project team members leads to PS. These findings are aligned with prior studies (Lindebaum and Jordan, 2012; Maqbool *et al.*, 2017) and propose that EI plays an important role in developing soft skills of project teams towards PS. Fisher (2011) noted that project outcomes cannot be achieved only with the employees' hard skills as their soft skills are also equally important for the accomplishment of the task. Hence, employees with high values of EI perform their jobs better than *t* with low EI. Community-driven projects of NGOs are complex and demanding that requires close monitoring to remain on desired schedule and track. Therefore, based on these findings, it is recommended to focus on EI of project employees as they display keen observance of project activities and are more proactive, decisive and confident which ultimately contributes to PS.

Next, the findings revealed that SL does not significantly relate to the JS of employees in the NGOs working in Pakistan. The finding does not align with prior studies, for which a plausible explanation may be found in the CoR theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Based on the assumption of CoR, SL in the current study was not understood as mature enough by the project team member to contribute to minimizing their JS as they did not consider it as an important resource when compared to other situational factors. In the context of Pakistani NGOs, these situational resources may include external factors or stressors like cultural context, workplace environment, leadership demands, job burden, and scarce resources as well as internal factors, such as beliefs, ideas, notions, and perceptions, etc. Job security, lack of funds, and search for donors are other issues that may take precedence ahead of SL in the current scenario and may possibly add to the JS of the employees, thereby rendering the impact of SL insignificant in the context of NGOs in Pakistan.

Further, the results showed that JS was not significantly related to PS. No previous studies were found to be in line with these findings. However, by keeping the situational circumstances in mind, this nonsignificant relationship may be because the jobs of project members are inherently stressful due to a variety of reasons discussed above. But given the high rate of unemployment in Pakistan, project members would have to remain motivated towards their work as poor performance on their part could lead to dismissal from their jobs. This dismissal

may lead to a chain of events that are not only limited to the workers themselves but also spillover effects towards their families. Thus, in order to keep their jobs secure, the projects members do not bother about the stress at work and remain focused on performing their jobs. Hence, JS was not found contributing towards PS.

The first mediation hypothesis revealed that EI was a significant mediator in the relationship between SL and PS. This finding explains that SL strengthens EI of the project team members that contribute to the success of the project. The findings explain that abilities and rich personality traits of the SL such as empathy, support, positive reinforcement and well-being of the followers exert positive effects on employees' EI that positively contributes to PS. Besides, SL also augments social learning process (Bandura and McClelland, 1977) of the followers or employees by sighting, noticing, impersonating and ultimately adapting those behaviors of the leadership, which may assist NGOs in successful completion of their projects.

Regarding the second mediation hypothesis, it is unveiled that reducing JS does not significantly mediate the nexus of SL with PS. Interestingly, these findings are contrary to our expectation and are also not aligned with the results of previous studies. The results negate the assumption of CoR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) on which the actual hypothesis was built; however, an alternate explanation to these results may be found in CoR theory itself. The contradiction might be an output of many other factors related to the nexus of SL and PS other than JS. These factors might be related to the leadership style, followers or employees related factors, organizational factors or the culture of the country. Out of many, one plausible explanation is that due to the turbulent economic conditions in Pakistan, the market conditions make jobs hard to find and this in turn shows little concern for employees pertinent to JS. Similarly, the job holders are consistently surrounded by uncertainties regarding their current jobs caused by the ever-looming threat of layoffs and cost cuts. Furthermore, there hovers a cloud of uncertainty about findings new jobs. Despite the many drawbacks of this uncertainty in the job market, it benefits the organizations in a way where the employees are extra motivated to keep their jobs. This would also hold true for NGO workers, whose jobs are contracted for project to project. Thus, in order to keep their jobs, the workers of NGOs would be extra motivated towards PS. As per the CoR theory, all the above contextual factors may have been resources that were considered more important by the employees of NGOs, thereby making them ignore the level of JS being experienced by them.

Regarding the moderation assumptions, the findings explain that TE does not significantly moderate the impact of EI on PS. The finding is not consistent with the findings of the previous literature. The inconsistency in findings might be due to the high levels of EI in employees, which enables them to understand and act according to their surroundings. In the current case, this understanding was high enough for them to reciprocate the empathy emotions of their SL. Due to this reciprocation, TE was not required as an outside factor as the EI level of NGO workers aimed towards their leaders were enough for them to contribute positively towards PS.

The study results found a significant moderating role of TE on the relationship between JS and PS although the direct relationship of JS with PS was insignificant. These findings were contrary to the previous literature and negate the assumption of SST theory (Meyer *et al.*, 2009) on which the hypothesis was based but provided important evidence to understand the key role of TE as a moderator in such scenarios. A plausible explanation to this may be found in the core concept of TE, where the collective impact of high functioning team was enough of a motivation and buffer for even those employees to work harder that were previously found under high JS. This led such NGO workers to make extra efforts to ensure that their project was a success.

Another possible explanation for the nonsupported hypotheses may be rooted in the very culture of the country (Pakistan) from where the data were collected. As pointed earlier,

followers from collectivist culture tend to be more responsive to leaders who care for their personal resource more than the work itself. Thus, in case of the current study, the high levels of SL exhibited by the leaders acted as buffer towards the external impacts of JS and TE. Due to the efforts shown by the leaders to ensure the satisfaction of their followers, as per the SL theory, the impact of JS and TE were ignored by the followers, thereby rendering their impacts insignificant on the behaviors of the followers.

Contributions, limitations and future research directions

The study contributes towards the extant literature, based mainly in developed countries by focusing on the NGO sector of a developing country like Pakistan. Besides, by adopting a holistic approach of a mediated moderated model for exploring the direct and indirect causal relationship between SL and PS, this study contributes to the methodology and literature. It is suggested to explore potential moderation or mediation in inconsistent relationships. The findings also provide important empirical insights for the policy and action of the key stakeholders of the developing country like Pakistan. The findings have managerial implications in favor of adopting SL and focus on the well-being of employees and uplifting their EI for achieving PS. Furthermore, the findings also provide insights for managers regarding the importance of TE in decreasing JS for PS.

Like any other studies, this study too has limitations. First, the results may not be generalizable as the study used a convenience sampling for ease of access to the project team members. Second, this study used self-reporting measures for constructs of EI, JS, TE and PS, which may cause issues like common method bias. Future studies may subjugate these limitations by opting for qualitative research using interviews or triangulation for tapping into more enriched insights or behavioral aspects of the subject. Lastly, future research could also consider some other mediating and moderating variables in the nexus between SL and PS.

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