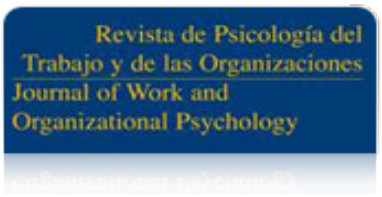

Revista de Psicología del Trabajo y de las Organizaciones
ISSN: 1576-5962
ISSN: 2174-0534
Colegio Oficial de la Psicología de Madrid

Wang, Fuxiang; Ding, He
Strengths-based Leadership and Employee Strengths Use:
The Roles of Strengths Self-efficacy and Job Insecurity
Revista de Psicología del Trabajo y de las Organizaciones, vol. 39, no. 1, 2023, pp. 47-54
Colegio Oficial de la Psicología de Madrid

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5093/jwop2023a6

Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology (2023) 39(1) 47-54

Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology

https://journals.copmadrid.org/jwop

Strengths-based Leadership and Employee Strengths Use: The Roles of Strengths Self-efficacy and Job Insecurity

Fuxiang Wang[a], and He Ding[b]

[a]Huaiyin Normal University, Huai'an, China; [b]North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 18 April 2022
Accepted 2 March 2023

Keywords:
Strengths-based leadership
Strengths use
Strengths self-efficacy
Job insecurity

ABSTRACT

Through the lens of self-efficacy and conservation of resources theories, the present study aims to test the mediating role of strengths self-efficacy and the moderating role of job insecurity in the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use. Research data from 286 employees working in various organizations in China were gathered at three points in time, spaced by a four-week interval. A moderated mediation path analysis was utilized to test our hypotheses. Results demonstrated that strengths self-efficacy mediates the positive association of strengths-based leadership with employee strengths use, and job insecurity attenuates the direct association of strengths-based leadership with strengths self-efficacy and the indirect relationship of strengths-based leadership with employee strengths use through strengths self-efficacy. The present study advances our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use.

El liderazgo basado en fortalezas y la utilización de estas por parte de los empleados: el papel de la autoeficacia de las fortalezas y la inseguridad laboral

Palabras clave:
Liderazgo basado en fortalezas
Uso de las fortalezas
Autoeficacia de las fortalezas
Inseguridad en el empleo

RESUMEN

A través de la lente de las teorías de la autoeficacia y de las teorías de la conservación de recursos, el estudio pone a prueba el rol mediador de la autoeficacia de las fortalezas y el papel moderador de la inseguridad en el empleo en la relación entre el liderazgo basado en fortalezas y el uso que hacen de las mismas los empleados. Se recogieron datos de la investigación con 286 empleados de diversas empresas de China en tres momentos separados por un intervalo de cuatro semanas. Se puso a prueba las hipótesis mediante un análisis de vías de mediación moderada. Según los resultados la autoeficacia de las fortalezas media la asociación positiva del liderazgo basado en fortalezas y el uso de las mismas por parte de los empleados y que la inseguridad en el empleo atenúa la asociación directa del liderazgo basado en fortalezas con la autoeficacia de las mismas y la relación indirecta de dicho liderazgo con el uso de las fortalezas por parte de los empleados a través de la autoeficacia de las mismas. El estudio es un paso hacia el conocimiento de los mecanismos subyacentes a la relación entre el liderazgo basado en fortalezas y el uso de las mismas por parte de los empleados.

Employee strengths use, defined as the behaviors that employee initially executes to capitalize on their own strengths at work (Van Woerkom et al., 2016a), has increasingly received more attention among researchers in the field of human resource management and organizational behavior (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2017). One reason why employee strengths use has triggered researchers' interest is that psychologists working in positive psychology regard individual strengths as the greatest area of individuals' growth and development (Van Woerkom et al., 2016a), especially when an individual is able to reap more benefits from usage of strengths (Miglianico et al., 2020). In addition, recent literature review about strengths use has also showed that employee strengths use could lead to a wide variety of beneficial outcomes such as increased work engagement, job satisfaction, decreased depression, and absenteeism (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018; Miglianico et al., 2020). These studies reiterate the importance of cultivating employee strengths use.

In order to better spur employees to leverage their strengths at work, a growing body of research has attempted to explore the driving forces of employee strengths use from various perspectives, such as autonomy support (Kong & Ho, 2016), perceived organizational support for strengths use (Van Woerkom et al., 2016b), and core self-

Cite this article as: Wang, F., & Ding, H. (2023). Strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use: The roles of strengths self-efficacy and job insecurity. *Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 39*(1), 47-54. https://doi.org/10.5093/jwop2023a6

Funding: This study was supported by "the National Nature Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 72202063)". Correspondence: believedh@126.com (H. Ding).

evaluation (Ding & Lin, 2020). In particular, leadership as a critical antecedent to employees' behaviors has reaped researchers' interest. A recent research found strengths-based leadership to positively relate to employee strengths use (Ding & Yu, 2022). Strengths-based leadership as a type of positive leadership refers to the degree to which leaders deliberately promote their own and followers' strengths identification, development, and deployment to cultivate their own and followers' positive subjective experience, which in turn boosts their own and followers' performance (Ding & Yu, 2022). The core aim of strengths-based leadership is to enhance employee strengths use (Ding et al., 2020).

However, research on the potential mechanism underlying the relationship of strengths-based leadership with employee strengths use is still underdeveloped. As such, to narrow this gap, the first purpose of the present study is to consider strengths self-efficacy as a mediator between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use in that self-efficacy has been regarded as an important cognitive mechanism explicating the effects of leadership (Shea & Howell, 1999; Walumbwa & Hartnell, 2011). While extant literature has studied the affective mechanisms through which employee strengths-based leadership relates to employee strengths use (Ding & Yu, 2021), they neglected the cognitive mechanism explicating the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use. Strengths self-efficacy as a specific form of efficacy, referring to the extent to which individuals believe that they have the abilities to apply their own strengths at work (Tsai et al., 2014), would be positively related to employee strengths use in that self-efficacy is the proximal determinant of actual behavior (Sirois, 2004). Importantly, strengths-based leadership is able to boost employees' strengths self-efficacy by vicarious experience related to strengths activities or promoting employees' strengths identification, development, and deployment, thereby leading to enhanced strengths use. As such, by investigating the mediating mechanism of strengths self-efficacy, the present study contributes to revealing the cognitive mechanism underlying the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use.

As a second purpose, we also consider job insecurity as a moderator between strengths-based leadership, strengths self-efficacy, and strengths use. Job insecurity has been found to be detrimental to employees' self-efficacy (Etehadi & Karatepe, 2019). Employees who perceive higher levels of job insecurity are more inclined to experience resource losses (Sender et al., 2017). According to the conservation of resources (COR) theory, when individuals experience resource losses, they are more likely to conserve existing resources to protect themselves from further resource losses (Halbesleben et al., 2009). Since strengths-based leadership can be conceptualized as an important resource (Ding & Yu, 2022; Halbesleben et al., 2014), employees with a high level of job insecurity are more inclined to conserve the existing strengths-based leadership resource to impede further resource losses rather than taking advantage of it to facilitate strengths self-efficacy and, in turn, strengths use. Hence, by investigating the moderating role of job insecurity, the present study contributes to a better understanding of the boundary condition of relationships among strengths-based leadership, strengths self-efficacy, and strengths use and, in doing so, helps us find out the way of fostering higher levels of employee strengths use.

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Strengths-based Leadership

In the past two decades, alongside the emergence of positive psychology, strengths-based approaches have triggered a large number of researchers' interests (Aguinis et al., 2012; Sutherland et al., 2010; White & Waters, 2015). Seligman et al. (2005) suggested that positive psychology is the science of investigating positive individual traits, positive subjective experiences, and positive institutions. Following the stream of research on positive psychology, researchers in the field of industrial and organizational psychology applied strengths-based approaches to leadership research and developed the strengths-based leadership construct for the sake of helping organizations cultivate positive subjective experiences of employees, which in turn improve performance of employees and organizations (Burkus, 2011; Ding et al., 2020; Rath & Conchie, 2008; Welch et al., 2014). Specifically, strengths-based leaders can cultivate their own and employees' positive subjective experiences primarily by promoting their own and employees' strengths identification, development, and deployment (Ding et al., 2020). However, it is worth noting that strengths-based leaders do not neglect their own and employees' weaknesses but correct weaknesses to the extent that these weaknesses do not affect functions of strengths, and minimize the negative influence of weaknesses by taking actions such as complementary strengths (Rath & Conchie, 2008).

Strengths-based leadership is constructed based on two basic assumptions: each person has their own unique strengths (Thunnissen et al., 2013), and the greatest room for individuals' growth and development lies in the areas of strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Well-researched positive leadership includes authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership (Bass, 1999), and humble leadership (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Although these three leadership styles also refer to employees or leaders' strengths, strengths-based leadership is different from them. First, although authentic leaders are characterized by recognizing and accepting their own strengths (Walumbwa & Hartnell, 2011), they does not highlight leaders' investment in development and deployment of their strengths and in employees' strengths. Second, although previous research showed that transformational leadership is likewise able to motivate employees to play to their strengths at work (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018), transformational leadership's purpose is to promote performance of employees and organization by crafting employees' attitudes and values (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) rather than by focusing on strengths. Third, humble leaders only appreciate employees' strengths (Owens & Hekman, 2012), but they do not invest more energy and resources in their own and employees' strengths identification, development, and deployment. More importantly, humble leadership is a bottom-up leadership style (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Conversely, strengths-based leadership is a top-down leadership style. Empirical research has also demonstrated that these three leadership styles has a good discriminant validity (Ding et al., 2020).

Strengths-based leadership has been widely applied in the field of leadership development due to its significant role in improving employee work engagement and organizational productivity and in decreasing employee experience of depression and stress (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Rath & Conchie, 2008). For example, Welch et al. (2014) found that more and more expert coaches are utilizing strengths-based leadership development to help leaders move from fair leadership performance toward excellent leadership performance; Burkus (2011) developed an effective pathway for shaping strengths-based leadership, namely organizational design. Recent empirical research have also provided initial evidence for the relationship of strengths-based leadership with task performance (Ding et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research on strengths-based leadership is still in its infancy. More research is needed to further understand the effectiveness of strengths-based leadership.

Strengths-based Leadership, Strengths Self-efficacy, and Employee Strengths Use

According to definition of strengths-based leadership (Ding et al., 2020), strengths-based leaders can be able to influence employees primarily by promoting leader own and employee strengths

identification, development, and usage. First, when leaders help employees to identify and develop their strengths, employees will have more clear recognition of their strengths and know how to better use strengths, which in turn enable employees to capitalize on their strengths at work successfully (Ding & Yu, 2021; Duan et al., 2019). Second, strengths-based leaders always provide employees with autonomy to play to their strengths (Ding & Yu, 2021). Autonomy support was found to be related to increased strengths use (Kong & Ho, 2016). Third, behaviors that leaders execute to identify, develop, and leverage their own strengths is conductive to creating strengths-based climate (Rath & Conchie, 2008), which will guide employees to use their strengths at work, partly because an strengths-based climate sends signals to employees that strengths use is appreciated, valued, and encouraged (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2017). Therefore, strengths-based leadership has a positive correlation with employee strengths use. A recent empirical research has confirmed this argument (Ding & Yu, 2022).

Self-efficacy was defined as an individual's belief in whether he/she possesses abilities required for successfully executing a specific behavior (Bandura, 1986). Strengths self-efficacy is a specific form of self-efficacy, referring to an individual's confidence in successfully capitalizing on strengths (Tsai et al., 2014). Employees high in strengths self-efficacy have strong confidence in using their strengths at work, and vice versa. The self-efficacy theory suggests that vicarious experience is quite effective in elevating an individual's self-efficacy, and such enhanced confidence in executing a given behavior in turn contributes to promoting an individual to perform the behavior (Bandura, 1986). When leaders focus on their own strengths at work and achieve desirable outcomes, employees might view them as role examples, which in turn spurs employees' strengths self-efficacy. As a result, increased strengths self-efficacy will induce an employee to use strengths at work in that self-efficacy has been regarded as a proximal antecedent to an actual behavior (Sirois, 2004).

In addition, according to the self-efficacy theory, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in whether they possess abilities required for successfully executing a specific behavior (Bandura, 1986). When a leader helps employees to identify, develop, and use their strengths, employees will receive more leader's supports for strengths use, which in turn boosts employees' confidence in leveraging their own strengths at work (Kurtessis et al., 2017). In this sense, employees will have higher levels of strengths self-efficacy, thereby exhibiting more strengths use behaviors. To sum up, based on the above reasoning, it is feasible to assume that strengths-based leadership can relate to employee strengths use through the mediational effect of strengths self-efficacy. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Strengths self-efficacy mediates the relationship of strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use.

The Moderating Role of Job Insecurity

In today's rapid change and uncertain business environment, employees' experience of job insecurity is increasing (Wang et al., 2019). Thus, employer organizations should devote more efforts to reduce employees' perception of job insecurity. Job insecurity has been defined as the extent to which employees perceive the potential job continuity loss (Ashford et al., 1989), that is, it reflects employees' worries about losing their current jobs (Sverke et al., 2002). It is worth noting that such perceived job loss is involuntary (Wang et al., 2019). Job insecurity consists of two dimensions, namely perceived severity of threat and perceived powerlessness to resist threats (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984). Additionally, job insecurity has been divided into quantitative and qualitative job insecurity: the former refers to an employee's perception of threat of job loss and the latter refers to an employee's perception of threat of losing some job features (Hellgren et al., 1999). A great deal of research has shown that job insecurity is able to lower employee performance, job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2015), and organizational commitment and identification (Feather & Rauter, 2004) and to elevate turnover intention, absenteeism (Staufenbiel & König, 2010), and stress (Tu et al., 2020). These negative outcomes induced by job insecurity can be treated as employees' resource losses (Mauno et al., 2005).

According to the COR theory, individuals have the tendency to acquire, maintain, and protect resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). To obtain more resources, individuals tend to invest extant resources, which in turn leads to resource gain spiral effects (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Specifically, existing resources an individual possesses are beneficial for gaining other resources (Halbesleben et al., 2009). Given that both strengths-based leadership and strengths self-efficacy are conceptualized as resources (Ding & Yu, 2022; Feldman et al., 2015), the extant strengths-based leadership resource can help employees obtain the strengths self-efficacy resource. Moreover, COR theory also points out that when individuals suffer from actual or potential resource losses, they are more likely to conserve extant resources to impede further resource losses in that individuals have stronger sensitivity to losses of resource compared to resource gains (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

With respect to the present study, employees with a high level of job insecurity are apt to experience higher levels of resource losses, which will stimulate employees to conserve current resources from strengths-based leadership rather than to use these resources to obtain other resources such as strengths self-efficacy. On the contrary, driven by motivation to acquire more resources (Halbesleben et al., 2009), employees with a low level of job insecurity are more inclined to invest extant resources from strengths-based leadership to achieve additional resources such as strengths self-efficacy. As such, based on the above reasoning, we can derive the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Job insecurity can lessen the relationship between strengths-based leadership and strengths self-efficacy in such a way that the positive relationship will be stronger for employees low in job insecurity rather than employees high in job insecurity.

According to the above discussions, we depict a mediational model regarding strengths-based leadership, strengths self-efficacy, and employee strengths use and a moderation model concerning strengths-based leadership, job insecurity, and strengths self-efficacy. Since strengths self-efficacy may be the proximal antecedent of employee strengths use, it is reasonable to believe that job insecurity may decrease strengths-based leadership's relationship with strengths self-efficacy and, in turn, employee strengths use. Thus, we extrapolate:

Hypothesis 3: Job insecurity can lower the mediational effect of strengths self-efficacy on the strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use relationship, such that this mediational effect will be stronger for employees low in job insecurity rather than employees high in job insecurity.

The proposed research model is depicted in Figure 1.

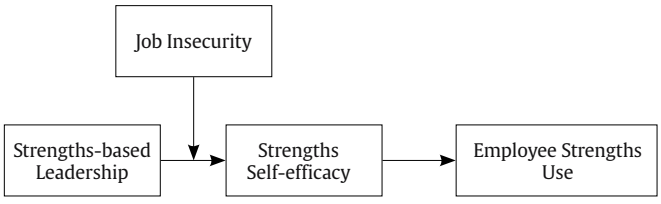

Figure 1. The Proposed Conceptual Model.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

Employees working in various organizations (e.g., manufacturing industry, financial, energy, and electric industries) in China

participated in the present study. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. In order to try to reduce common method variance, self-report data were collected at three time points with a time lag of four weeks between each wave via online. We contacted 30 human resource managers from different organizations and asked them to invite their colleagues to participate in the present study. We promised that all information relevant to participants would be treated as confidential strictly, and participants had the autonomy to stop participating in this study at any time. After received informed consent, we carried out our survey. No any incentives were provided to participants.

In the first stage, we distributed 480 questionnaires regarding demographic variables and strengths-based leadership. A total of 437 questionnaires were obtained, showing 91.04% response rate. Four weeks later, 437 participants responding in the first stage were asked to complete job insecurity and strengths self-efficacy scales. We received 386 questionnaires, showing 88.33% response rate. In the third stage, 386 participants responding in the second stage were asked to complete employee strengths use scale. A total of 322 questionnaires were received, indicating 83.42% response rate. Finally, 286 valid paired data were obtained. Among 286 participants (see Table 1), 53.15% were males, 96.15% had received bachelor's degree, 49.65% were leaders, 76.60% had worked in the present organization for more than five years, 40.90% had worked with the present leader for more than three years; the average age of participants was 34.84 years (SD = 7.49).

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the North China Electric Power University and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Table 1. Sample Distribution

Demographic Characteristics	Categories	Percentage
Industry	Manufacturing	18.65
	Financial	13.74
	Energy	30.38
	Electric	10.01
	Other	27.22
Gender	Male	53.15
	Female	46.85
Education	Under bachelor's degree	3.85
	Bachelor's degree	58.38
	Master's degree	32.87
	PhD	4.90
Job level	Employee without leadership position	50.35
	Front-line leader	27.27
	Middle leader	19.58
	Senior leader	2.80

Measures

Since we adopted English-based core self-evaluation, job insecurity, strengths self-efficacy, and employee strengths use scales, a translation-back translation procedure (Brislin, 1970) was followed to derive Chinese scales before conducting the survey. Items of all research constructs were evaluated on a Likert 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Strengths-based Leadership

Strengths-based leadership was measured with an 8-item scale developed by Ding et al. (2020). An example item was "My supervisor gives me more autonomy to use my strengths at work". In the present study, Cronbach's a of this scale was .93.

Job Insecurity

We adopted 5-item scale from Wang et al. (2014) to measure job insecurity. An example item was "My job is likely to change in the future". In the present study, Cronbach's a of this scale was .79.

Strengths Self-efficacy

We measured strengths self-efficacy with a 5-item scale from Tsai et al. (2014). An example item was "I have the ability to use my strengths without any struggles". In the present study, Cronbach's a of this scale was .95.

Employee Strengths Use

We measured employee strengths use with five items from Van Woerkom et al. (2016a). An example item was "In my job, I try to apply my talents as much as possible". In the present study, Cronbach's a of this scale was .94.

Control Variables

Employees' age and core self-evaluation were selected as control variables. In terms of age, previous research showed that compared to younger employees, older employees tend to have a more clear recognition of their strengths, making it easier for them to proactively play to these strengths at work (Meyers et al., 2020), that is, age may have significant influence on employee strengths use (Meyers et al., 2020). Therefore, we controlled for employees' age in our study. Furthermore, given that employee strengths use is characterized by initiative (Van Woerkom et al., 2016a), core self-evaluation is quite effective in enhancing employee strengths use since employees high in core self-evaluation are more proactive (Ding & Lin, 2020). Hence, core self-evaluation was also considered as control variable in the present study. We measured core self-evaluation with a 12-item scale developed by Judge et al. (2003). An example item was "I can successfully complete the task". In the present study, Cronbach's a of this scale was 0.81.

Results

Discriminant Validity Test

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was adopted to examine discriminant validity between strengths-based leadership, job insecurity, strengths self-efficacy, employee strengths use, and core self-evaluation. To lower inflated measurement errors due to multiple items of the latent variable (Alhija & Wisenbaker, 2006), we constructed three random item parcels for core self-evaluation and two item parcels for strengths-based leadership according to its two dimensions, namely employee's strengths-based leadership and leader's own strengths-based leadership. Results of CFA demonstrated the five-factor measurement model regarding strengths-based leadership, job insecurity, strengths self-efficacy, employee strengths use, and core self-evaluation exhibits a better fit to the data compared to four alternative measurement models (see Table 2). Thus, these five research constructs have a good discriminant validity.

Common Method Variance Test

Since the present study gathered data from a single source, it is necessary to test common method variance of research data. To

Table 2. Results of CFAs: Comparison of Measurement Models

Models	χ^2	*df*	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	$\Delta\chi2(\Delta df)$
Baseline model	340.37	160	2.13	.06	.96	.96	-
Four-factor model[1]	558.58	164	3.41	.09	.90	.90	218.21***(4)
Three-factor model[2]	1650.40	167	9.88	.18	.63	.64	1310.03***(7)
Two-factor model[3]	1969.95	169	11.66	.19	.56	.56	629.58*** (9)
One factor model[4]	2404.31	170	14.14	.22	.45	.45	2063.94*** (10)

Note. $N = 286$. [1]Strengths-based leadership and core self-evaluation combined into one factor; [2]strengths-based leadership and core self-evaluation combined into one factor, and strengths self-efficacy and employee strengths use combined into one factor; [3]strengths-based leadership, core self-evaluation, strengths self-efficacy and employee strengths use combined into one factor; [4]all combined into one factor.
***$p < .001$.

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	38.84	7.49	-				
2. Core self-evaluation	3.41	0.53	.04	-			
3. Strengths-based leadership	4.03	0.71	-.11	.29**	-		
4. Job insecurity	2.86	0.78	.07	-.07	-.08	-	
5. Strengths self-efficacy	3.85	0.67	-.09	.20**	.30**	-.11	-
6. Employee strengths use	4.10	0.60	.04	.34**	.33**	-.07	.43**

Note. $N = 286$.
**$p < .01$.

this end, a single unmeasured common method factor was adopted (Podsakoff et al., 2003). A common method factor was created and loaded on all items of job insecurity, strengths self-efficacy, and employee strengths use and on five item parcels of core self-evaluation and strengths-based leadership. Results indicated that the six-factor measurement model concerning the method factor, strengths-based leadership, job insecurity, strengths self-efficacy, employee strengths use, and core self-evaluation fits very well ($\chi^2 = 371.60$, $df = 159$, $\chi^2/df = 2.34$, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .95, IFI = .95) and reports a better fit to the data than the five-factor measurement model regarding strengths-based leadership, job insecurity, strengths self-efficacy, employee strengths use, and core self-evaluation. However, the common method factor only explained 16.16% of variance, less than 25% (Williams et al., 1989). Therefore, in the present research data serious common method variance did not exist.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analysis

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of research variables are displayed in Table 3. Results of correlational analysis showed that strengths-based leadership is positively related to strengths self-efficacy ($r = .30$, $p < .01$) and employee strengths use ($r = .33$, $p < .01$), and strengths self-efficacy is positively related to employee strengths use ($r = .43$, $p < .01$). These results provide preliminary evidence for our research hypotheses.

Hypothesys Testing

A moderated mediation path analysis was applied to test our hypotheses, and 95% confidence intervals (CI) with bootstrapping (2,000 resample) was utilized to determine the significance of path coefficients. Since core self-evaluation and strengths-based leadership were collected at the same time point and there was a significant correlation between them, we enabled core self-evaluation to correlate to strengths-based leadership. Results of path analysis demonstrated that the moderated mediation path model exhibits a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 27.24$, $df = 13$, $\chi^2/df = 2.10$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .92, IFI = .92) and explained 15.80% of variance in strengths self-efficacy and 27.2% of variance in employee strengths use. The path coefficients are presented in Figure 2.

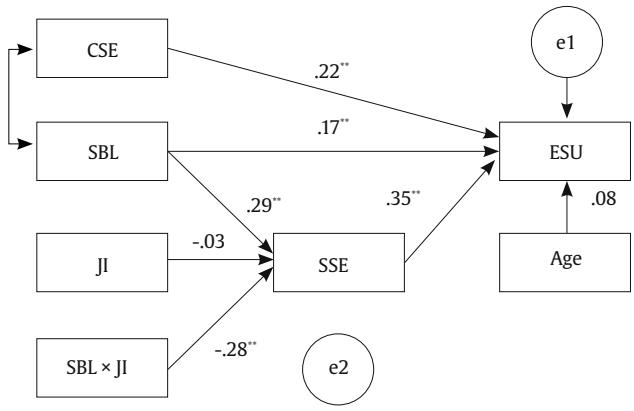

Figure 2. Results of the Moderated Mediation Path Model Analysis.
Standardized coefficients were presented: SBL = strengths-based leadership; JI = job insecurity; SSE = strengths self-efficacy; ESU = employee strengths use; CSE = core self-evaluation. SBL × JI was the interaction of SBL and JI centered values.
**$p < .01$.

Hypothesis 1 assumed that strengths self-efficacy mediates the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use. The mediational effect was significant (effect = 0.10, 95% CI [.06, .15]), providing support for Hypothesis 1. Since the direct relationship of strengths-based leadership with employee strengths was significant, strengths self-efficacy plays a partially mediational role in strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use.

Hypothesis 2 expected that job insecurity negatively moderates the relationship of strengths-based leadership with employee strengths use. The interaction effect was significant (coefficient = -0.28, $p < .01$, 95% CI [-.40, -.15]). To more clearly depict the moderating effect of job insecurity on the strengths-based

leadership and strengths self-efficacy relationship, the moderation effect was presented in Figure 3. Slope analyses indicated that the relationship between strengths-based leadership and strengths self-efficacy is significant when job insecurity is low (Mean – 1 *SD*, estimate = 0.48, 95% CI [.34, .60], $p < .01$) rather than when job insecurity is high (Mean + 1 *SD*, estimate = 0.13, 95% CI [-.002, .27], $p > .05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

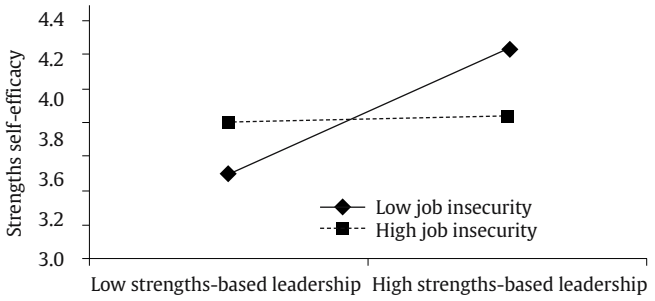

Figure 3. The Interaction Plot of Strengths-based Leadership and Job Insecurity on Strengths Self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 3 postulated that job insecurity negatively moderates the mediational effect of strengths self-efficacy on the relationship of strengths-based leadership with employee strengths use. The moderated mediation effect was significant (estimate = -0.05, 95% CI [-.08, -.02], $p < .01$). Further, the moderated mediation effect was stronger when job insecurity is low (Mean – 1 *SD*, estimate = 0.13, 95% CI [.08, .19], $p < .01$) compared to when job insecurity is high (Mean + 1 *SD*, estimate = 0.04, 95% CI [.001, .08], $p < .05$). The slope difference analysis showed that the difference between the moderated mediation effect at the low job insecurity level (Mean – 1 *SD*) and the moderated mediation effect at the high job insecurity level (Mean + 1 *SD*) was significant (estimate = 0.09, 95% CI [.05, .16], $p < .01$) Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Post Hoc Analysis

According to the COR theory, when employees experience losses of resource induced by job insecurity, the relationship of strengths self-efficacy as an important personal resource with employee strengths use might be attenuated (Halbesleben et al., 2014). However, this study did not consider job insecurity as a moderator between strengths self-efficacy and employee strengths use. Nevertheless, we also conducted additional analysis regarding the moderating effect of job insecurity on the relationship between strengths self-efficacy and employee strengths use. Analytical results showed that job insecurity did not significantly moderate the strengths self-efficacy and employee strengths use relationship (coefficient of interaction term = -0.07, $t = -1.16$, $p > .05$, 95% CI [-.18, .05].

Discussion

This study of 286 employees working in various organizations in China investigated the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use and the mediating role of strengths self-efficacy and the moderating role of job insecurity in the relationship. The results of a moderated mediation path analysis offered support for all of hypotheses.

On one hand, the present study found that strengths self-efficacy acts as a mediator in the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use. The mediational effect can be explicated by self-efficacy theory suggesting that vicarious experience and support for executing a given behavior contributes to fostering individuals' confidence in exhibiting the behavior and then motivates individuals to do actual behavior (Bandura, 1986; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2014). To the best of our knowledge, very little research has explored the potential mechanism underlying the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use. Although Ding and Yu (2021) revealed that trait emotional intelligence is a vital mediator between employee strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use, they neglected the cognitive mechanism that underlies the relationship of strengths-based leadership with employee strengths use. Thus, by investigating the mediational effect of strengths self-efficacy, the present study contributes to a better understanding of how strengths-based leadership relates to employee strengths use.

On the other hand, the present study indicated that job insecurity can lower strengths-based leadership's association with strengths self-efficacy and, in turn, employee strengths use. This finding is similar to previous research revealing that role overload negatively moderates employee strengths-based leadership's relationship with trait emotional intelligence and then with employee strengths use (Ding & Yu, 2021). This result can be explained by the COR theory suggesting that individuals who are confronted with resource losses tend to protect extant resources from further losses of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Specifically, when employees experience resource losses resulted from higher job insecurity, they are more inclined to conserve extant resources induced by strengths-based leadership to impede further resource losses rather than use these existing resources to yield other resources such as strengths self-efficacy. Such decreased strengths self-efficacy will in turn lead to decreased employee strengths use. Since no prior research investigated the boundary conditions of effects of strengths-based leadership, the present study can help us understand when effectiveness of strengths-based leadership is greater and find out a way of cultivating higher levels of employee strengths use.

Managerial Implications

The present study has two aspects of managerial implications for enhancing employee strengths use. First, the mediational effect of strengths self-efficacy on the strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use relationship means that fostering strengths self-efficacy of employee is effective in boosting employee strengths use. Second, the self-efficacy theory demonstrated that past successful experiences are beneficial for improving self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Based on this logic, leaders should execute strengths intervention activities toward employees by encouraging them to reflect their past successful experiences relevant to strengths use (Roberts et al., 2005), which in turn enhances strengths knowledge of employees (McDowall et al., 2014). Consequently, employees who have a clear recognition of their own strengths will have stronger confidence in leveraging their strengths at work.

Third, since job insecurity can lower effectiveness of strengths-based leadership, the employer organizations should try to reduce employees' perceptions of job insecurity so that strengths-based leaders can to a greater degree boost employee strengths use by cultivating strengths self-efficacy of employee. The work of Ashford et al. (1989) demonstrated that decreasing employees' perception of role ambiguity and role conflict or cultivating internal locus of control could enable employees to perceive lower job insecurity. Moreover, an employee's employability has been found to be linked with lower levels of job insecurity (De Cuyper et al., 2008). Hence, the employer organizations or leaders should provide employees with more training opportunities related to skills improvement so as to elevate employees' employability (Sheldon & Thornthwaite, 2005).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of the present study are fourfold. First, this study collected data from a single source, which might give rise to potential common method variance. Although our research confirmed that common method variance of research data used in the present study did not pose a serious threat to our results, future research should attempt to collect data from different sources (e.g., supervisor-rated employee strengths use and supervisor-rated strengths-based leadership) to improve our results' robustness.

Second, the present study adopted a cross-sectional research design to test our hypotheses, which limits causal inferences of the relationships between strengths-based leadership, strengths self-efficacy, and employee strengths use. In future research, researchers should conduct a cross-lagged design or experimental design to examine causal relationship between strengths-based leadership, strengths self-efficacy, and employee strengths use.

Third, the present study examined hypotheses only by a sample of Chinese employees, which did not ensure cross-cultural applicability of our findings. Specifically, previous research has suggested that strengths-based leadership might be effective for employees high in individualism or low power distance orientation (Meyers et al., 2020). As such, future research should control for culture dimensions that might affect an employee's perception of strengths-based leadership when a sample from the same culture is deployed to test our hypotheses.

Fourth, previous research has shown that trait emotional intelligence and intention to use strengths could mediate the relationship of employee strengths-based leadership with employee strengths use (Ding & Yu, 2021). Although strengths-based leadership consists of an employee strengths-based leadership and leader's own strengths-based leadership (Ding et al., 2020), we should also control over the mediational effects of trait emotional intelligence and intention to use strengths to identify the unique contribution of strengths self-efficacy when empirically exploring the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between strengths-based leadership and employee strengths use.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to the employees who participated in this study.

References

Aguinis, H., Gottfredson, R. K., & Joo, H. (2012). Delivering effective performance feedback: The strengths-based approach. *Business Horizons, 55*(2), 105-111. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.10.004

Alhija, F. N. A., & Wisenbaker, J. (2006). A Monte Carlo study investigating the impact of item parceling strategies on parameter estimates and their standard errors in CFA. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 13*(2), 204-228. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328007sem1302_3

Ashford, S. J., Lee, C., & Bobko, P. (1989). Content, cause, and consequences of job insecurity: A theory-based measure and substantive test. *Academy of Management Journal, 32*(4), 803-829. https://doi.org/10.2307/256569

Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 16*(3), 315-338. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.001

Bakker, A. B., & van Woerkom, M. (2018). Strengths use in organizations: A positive approach of occupational health. *Canadian Psychology, 59*(1), 38-46. https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000120

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action,* Prentice-Hall

Bass, B. M. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 8*(1), 9-32. https://doi.org/10.1080/135943299398410

Biswas-Diener, R., Kashdan, T. B., & Minhas, G. (2011). A dynamic approach to psychological strength development and intervention. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 6*(2), 106-118. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2010.545429

Brislin, R. W. (1970). Back-translation for cross-cultural research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 1*(3), 185-216. https://doi.org/10.1177/135910457000100301

Buckingham, M., & Clifton, D. (2001). *Now, discover your strengths.* Free Press.

Burkus, D. (2011). Building the strong organization: Exploring the role of organizational design in strengths-based leadership. *Journal of Strategic Leadership, 3*(1), 54-66.

Caesens, G., & Stinglhamber, F. (2014). The relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement: The role of self-efficacy and its outcomes. *European Review of Applied Psychology, 64*(5), 259-267. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erap.2014.08.002

Cuyper, N. D., Bernhard-Oettel, C., Berntson, E., Witte, H. D., & Alarco, B. (2008). Employability and employees' well-being: Mediation by job insecurity 1. *Applied Psychology, 57*(3), 488-509. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00332.x

Ding, H., & Lin, X. (2020). Exploring the relationship between core self-evaluation and strengths use: The perspective of emotion. *Personality and Individual Differences, 157,* Article 109804. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109804

Ding, H., & Yu, E. (2021). Followers' strengths-based leadership and strengths use of followers: The roles of trait emotional intelligence and role overload. *Personality and Individual Differences, 168*, Article 110300. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110300

Ding, H., & Yu, E. (2022). Strengths-based leadership and employee psychological well-being: A moderated mediation model. *Journal of Career Development, 49*(5), 1108-1121. https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453211018807

Ding, H., Yu, E., & Li, Y. (2020). Strengths-based leadership and its impact on task performance: A preliminary study. *South Africa Journal of Business Management, 51*(1), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v51i1.1832

Duan, W., Bu, H., Zhao, J., & Guo, X. (2019). Examining the mediating roles of strengths knowledge and strengths use in a 1-year single-session character strength-based cognitive intervention. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 20*(6), 1673-1688. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-018-0014-z

Etehadi, B., & Karatepe, O. M. (2019). The impact of job insecurity on critical hotel employee outcomes: The mediating role of self-efficacy. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, 28*(6), 665-689. https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2019.1556768

Feather, N. T., & Rauter, K. A. (2004). Organizational citizenship behaviours in relation to job status, job insecurity, organizational commitment and identification, job satisfaction and work values. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 77*(1), 81-94. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317904322915928

Feldman, D. B., Davidson, O. B., & Margalit, M. (2015). Personal resources, hope, and achievement among college students: The conservation of resources perspective. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 16*(3), 543-560. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9508-5

Greenhalgh, L., & Rosenblatt, Z. (1984). Job insecurity: Toward conceptual clarity. *Academy of Management Review, 9*(3), 438-448. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1984.4279673

Halbesleben, J. R., Harvey, J., & Bolino, M. C. (2009). Too engaged? A conservation of resources view of the relationship between work engagement and work interference with family. *The Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*(6), 1452-1465. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017595

Halbesleben, J. R., Neveu, J. P., Paustian-Underdahl, S. C., & Westman, M. (2014). Getting to the "COR" understanding the role of resources in conservation of resources theory. *Journal of Management, 40*(5), 1334-1364. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314527130

Hellgren, J., Sverke, M., & Isaksson, K. (1999). A two-dimensional approach to job insecurity: Consequences for employee attitudes and well-being. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 8*(2), 179-195. https://doi.org/10.1080/135943299398311

Hobfoll, S. E., Halbesleben, J., Neveu, J. P., & Westman, M. (2018). Conservation of resources in the organizational context: The reality of resources and their consequences. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 5,* 103-128. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640

Judge, T. A., Erez, A., Bono, J. E., & Thoresen, C. J. (2003). The core self-evaluations scale: Development of a measure. *Personnel Psychology, 56*(2), 303-331. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2003.tb00152.x

Kong, D. T., & Ho, V. T. (2016). A self-determination perspective of strengths use at work: Examining its determinant and performance implications. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 11*(1), 15-25. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1004555

Kurtessis, J. N., Eisenberger, R., Ford, M. T., Buffardi, L. C., Stewart, K. A., & Adis, C. S. (2017). Perceived organizational support: A meta-analytic evaluation of organizational support theory. *Journal of Management, 43*(6), 1854-1884. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206315575554

Littman-Ovadia, H., Lavy, S., & Boiman-Meshita, M. (2017). When theory and research collide: Examining correlates of signature strengths use at work. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 18*(2), 527-548. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9739-8

Mauno, S., Kinnunen, U., & Pyykkö, M. (2005). Does work–family conflict mediate the relationship between work–family culture and self-reported distress? Evidence from five Finnish organizations. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 78*(4), 509-530. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317905X37082

McDowall, A., Freemann, K., & Marshall, K. (2014). Is feedforward the way forward? A comparison of the effects of feedforward coaching and feedback. *International Coaching Psychology Review, 9*(2), 135-146. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2014.9.2.135

Meyers, M. C., Kooij, D., Kroon, B., de Reuver, R., & van Woerkom, M. (2020). Organizational support for strengths use, work engagement, and contextual performance: The moderating role of age. *Applied Research in Quality of Life, 15*(2), 485-502. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-018-9702-4

Meyers, M. C., & van Woerkom, M. (2017). Effects of a strengths intervention on general and work-related well-being: The mediating role of positive affect. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 18*(3), 671-689. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9745-x

Miglianico, M., Dubreuil, P., Miquelon, P., Bakker, A. B., & Martin-Krumm, C. (2020). Strength use in the workplace: A literature review. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 21*(2), 737-764. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00095-w

Owens, B. P., & Hekman, D. R. (2012). Modeling how to grow: An inductive examination of humble leader behaviors, contingencies, and outcomes. *Academy of Management Journal, 55*(4), 787-818. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0441

Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J. Y., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2003). Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 88*(5), 879-903. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879

Rafferty, A. E., & Griffin, M. A. (2004). Dimensions of transformational leadership: Conceptual and empirical extensions. *The Leadership Quarterly, 15*(3), 329-354. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.02.009

Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths-based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow*. Gallup Press.

Roberts, L. M., Dutton, J. E., Spreitzer, G. M., Heaphy, E. D., & Quinn, R. E. (2005). Composing the reflected best-self-portrait: Building pathways for becoming extraordinary in work organizations. *Academy of Management Review, 30*(4), 712-736. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2005.18378874

Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60*(5), 410-421. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410

Sender, A., Arnold, A., & Staffelbach, B. (2017). Job security as a threatened resource: reactions to job insecurity in culturally distinct regions. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 28*(17), 2403-2429. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2015.1137615

Shea, C. M., & Howell, J. M. (1999). Charismatic leadership and task feedback: A laboratory study of their effects on self-efficacy and task performance. *The Leadership Quarterly, 10*(3), 375-396. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(99)00020-X

Sheldon, P., & Thornthwaite, L. (2005). Employability skills and vocational education and training policy in Australia: An analysis of employer association agendas. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, 43*(3), 404-425. https://doi.org/10.1177/1038411105059100

Sirois, F. M. (2004). Procrastination and intentions to perform health behaviors: The role of self-efficacy and the consideration of future consequences. *Personality and Individual Differences, 37*(1), 115-128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2003.08.005

Staufenbiel, T., & König, C. J. (2010). A model for the effects of job insecurity on performance, turnover intention, and absenteeism. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 83*(1), 101-117. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317908X401912

Sutherland, K. S., Conroy, M., Abrams, L., & Vo, A. (2010). Improving interactions between teachers and young children with problem behavior: A strengths-based approach. *Exceptionality, 18*(2), 70-81. https://doi.org/10.1080/09362831003673101

Sverke, M., Hellgren, J., & Näswall, K. (2002). No security: a meta-analysis and review of job insecurity and its consequences. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 7*(3), 242-264. https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.7.3.242

Thunnissen, M., Boselie, P., & Fruytier, B. (2013). A review of talent management: 'Infancy or adolescence?'. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 24*(9), 1744-1761. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.777543

Tsai, C. L., Chaichanasakul, A., Zhao, R., Flores, L. Y., & Lopez, S. J. (2014). Development and validation of the strengths self-efficacy scale (SSES). *Journal of Career Assessment, 22*(2), 221-232. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072713493761

Tu, Y., Long, L., Wang, H.-J., & Jiang, L. (2020). To prevent or to promote: How regulatory focus moderates the differentiated effects of quantitative versus qualitative job insecurity on employee stress and motivation. *International Journal of Stress Management, 27*(2), 135-145. https://doi.org/10.1037/str0000139

Van Woerkom, M., Mostert, K., Els, C., Bakker, A. B., De Beer, L., & Rothman, S., Jr. (2016a). Strengths use and deficit correction in organizations: Development and validation of a questionnaire. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 25*(6), 960-975. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2016.1193010

Van Woerkom, M., Oerlemans, W., & Bakker, A. B. (2016b). Strengths use and work engagement: A weekly diary study. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 25*(3), 384-397. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2015.1089862

Walumbwa, F. O., & Hartnell, C. A. (2011). Understandindg transformational leadership–employee performance links: The role of relational identification and self-efficacy. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 84*(1), 153-172. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317910X485818

Wang, H. J., Le Blanc, P., Demerouti, E., Lu, C. Q., & Jiang, L. (2019). A social identity perspective on the association between leader-member exchange and job insecurity. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 28*(6), 800-809. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1653853

Wang, H. J., Lu, C. Q., & Lu, L. (2014). Do people with traditional values suffer more from job insecurity? The moderating effects of traditionality. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 23*(1), 107-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2012.712751

Wang, H. J., Lu, C. Q., & Siu, O. L. (2015). Job insecurity and job performance: The moderating role of organizational justice and the mediating role of work engagement. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 100*(4), 1249-1258. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038330

Welch, D., Grossaint, K., Reid, K., & Walker, C. (2014). Strengths-based leadership development: Insights from expert coaches. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 66*(1), 20-37. https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000002

White, M. A., & Waters, L. E. (2015). A case study of 'The Good School: 'Examples of the use of Peterson's strengths-based approach with students. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 10*(1), 69-76. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2014.920408

Williams, L., Cote, J., & Buckley, M. (1989). Lack of method variance in self-reported affect and perceptions at work: Reality or artifact? *Journal of Applied Psychology, 74*(3), 462-468. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.74.3.462