Humble leadership and work–family enrichment: promotion focused and thriving

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing upon work-home resources model, this study aims to investigate how and when humble leadership influences followers’ work–family enrichment. Specifically, this study focuses on the mediating role of thriving at work and moderating role of promotion focus.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 292 employees of science and technology enterprises in China through a three-wave questionnaire survey. Hierarchical regression analysis and bootstrapping approach were employed to test hypotheses.

Findings – This study found that thriving at work significantly mediated the relationship between humble leadership and work–family enrichment. Promotion focus strengthened the positive relationship between humble leadership and thriving at work and the indirect effect of humble leadership on work–family enrichment through thriving at work.

Practical implications – The findings of this study offer guidance for managers to enhance thriving at work and improve employees’ work–family experiences.

Originality/value – First, this study explores the work-to family spillover effects of humble leadership by examining the family outcomes of humble leadership. Second, this study further uncovers the underlying mechanism between humble leadership and work–family enrichment by demonstrating the mediating role of thriving at work. Third, by exploring the moderating role of promotion focus, this study provides insight into the boundary conditions of the impact of humble leadership.

Keywords Humble leadership, Thriving at work, Work–family enrichment, Promotion focus

Paper type Original article

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Research involving human participants: Participants are recruited full-time supervisors and employees from multiple organizations located in China. All participants participated in our research voluntarily.

Informed consent: In our research, all participants are informed and they agreed that the data which is from them can be used for our research. We promised that the data obtained will only be used for academic research and will be treated confidentially.

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1. Introduction

In today’s dynamic and uncertain environments, leaders face an increasing challenge in navigating the complexities at the top, particularly in light of pervasive corporate scandals linked to leaders’ unchecked ego, hubris, and narcissism (e.g., Kelemen et al., 2023; Owens and Hekman, 2012). Thus, there is a growing call from both prominent thinkers and the mainstream media for leaders to adopt a humble approach in leading their organizations. Under such backgrounds, humble leadership has become a hot topic in the literature over the past few decades (Kelemen et al., 2023; Lehmann et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2005). Humble leadership has been defined as “an interpersonal characteristic that emerges in social contexts that connotes a manifested willingness to view oneself accurately, a displayed appreciation of others’ strengths and contributions, and teachability” (Owens et al., 2013, p. 1518). A burgeoning number of studies have shown that humble leadership could benefit both employees and organizations, such as fostering employees’ organizational citizenship behaviors and proactive behaviors (Cho et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2020; Owens et al., 2013), enhancing individual and team creativity (Ali et al., 2020; Tariq et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2017), improving job performance (Chandler et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022; Owens and Hekman, 2016; Wang et al., 2018), promoting career success (Chughtai and Arifeen, 2023), and even promoting organizational performance (Ou et al., 2014).

Despite the fruitful empirical findings in previous research, scholarly inquiries to date have primarily documented the positive effects of humble leadership on work-related outcomes (Chandler et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2022), largely neglecting the family consequences of humble leadership. This is unfortunate, first, because family domain represents a critical field outside of the workplace for employees, and family life has a significant influence on their subjective well-being as well as the work domain (Zhang et al., 2018), especially in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era where the boundaries between employees’ work and home domains increasingly blurred. Work–family issues and workers’ well-being have multiplied as strategic issues (Allen and French, 2023; Kossek et al., 2023). Second, existing research has suggested that leader behavior plays a prominent role in shaping followers’ work–family experiences (Allen and French, 2023; Li et al., 2017). When employees leave work, they take the workplace experience home with them (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). For example, servant leadership is positively associated with followers’ work–family enrichment or work-to-family positive spillover (Tang et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2022), and ethical leadership significantly relates to the employees’ work–family enrichment and family satisfaction (Zhang and Tu, 2018). However, the empirical evidence linking leaders to the work–family interface has mainly focused on traditional top-down leadership styles. Scant attention has been placed on the impact of humble leadership on followers’ family life. Theoretically, humble leadership, while conceptually overlapping with other leadership behaviors, is distinct (Kelemen et al., 2023; Rego et al., 2017). Its primary focus is on modeling the process of becoming for followers and legitimizing uncertainty (Owens and Hekman, 2012). Whereas servant leadership emphasizes modeling serving others rather than learning and development (Rego et al., 2017), ethical leadership externally focuses on maintaining compliance with normative standards (Kelemen et al., 2023). A recent meta-analysis also reported that humble leadership contributes a significant incremental variance beyond servant, ethical, and transformational leadership (Luo et al., 2022). Besides, Kossek et al. (2023) recently noted that leadership and work–life interface literature are not well-integrated, and future research needs to focus on how new leadership impacts subordinates’ nonwork outcomes. Therefore, an in-depth investigation into the work–family outcomes of humble leadership has important implications for holistically understanding the effects of humble leader behavior and broadening the thematic scope in a manner that aligns more closely with societal realities (Allen and French, 2023; Kossek et al., 2023).

To address the above concerns, the purpose of the current study is to examine the link between humble leadership and work–family enrichment, which refers to “the experiences in
one role improving the quality of life in the other role” (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006, p. 73). Based on the work-home resources model, which indicates that contextual resources are the starting point for enriching the work-home processes (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). Resources are defined as anything perceived by people to help them achieve their goals (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Contextual resources, specifically, are those located outside the self and manifest in the social contexts of the individual (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). Humble leaders are employee-centered, will genuinely acknowledge their strengths and contributions, and listen to the ideas and feedback from followers (Owens et al., 2013), these positive behaviors are conducive to cultivating high-quality relationships and providing subordinates with the necessary material and psychological resources (Cho et al., 2021; Lehmann et al., 2023; Owens and Hekman, 2012; Qin et al., 2020), such that it can be regarded as a contextual work resource (He et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2020; Tariq et al., 2023).

According to the work-home resources model, work–family enrichment is a process wherein contextual resources contribute to the development of personal resources, subsequently facilitating performance in the home domain (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). The critical mechanism determining whether the relationship between one’s work and family roles is enriching or not thus lies in personal resources. In terms of personal resources developed in the work domain, we regard thriving at work as an important mediator that accounts for the influence of humble leadership on work–family enrichment. Thriving at work is defined as “the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 538). Previous studies have suggested that thriving at work, as a personal resource, can buffer the negative effects of de-energizing relationships on job performance (Gerbası et al., 2015), and transmit the effects of transformational leadership on employee burnout and proactivity (Hildenbrand et al., 2018; Niessen et al., 2017). The socially embedded model of thriving outlines that resources and contextual features of work contexts enable employees to experience thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Humble leadership characterized by “models how to grow with their followers” (Owens and Hekman, 2012, p. 801), aligns with the concept of thriving at work, which represents a prototype of personal growth at work (Niessen et al., 2012) and captures a sense of forward progress (Porath et al., 2012; Goh et al., 2022). Therefore, humble leadership as a crucial contextual resource would influence thriving (Tariq et al., 2023). When employees thrive at work, resources derived from work might spillover into the family domain, resulting in enriched family lives (Hyde et al., 2022; Spreitzer et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2020).

In addition, leadership is a social process determined by both leaders and followers (Zhu et al., 2009). The effectiveness of humble leadership is also contingent on followers’ specific characteristics (Owens and Hekman, 2012). However, the moderators in the study of humble leadership are restricted to the attributes of leaders’ humility and the characteristics of the leaders themselves (Kelemen et al., 2023). Scholars have called for more research on the boundary conditions of the impacts of humble leadership (Chandler et al., 2023; Kelemen et al., 2023). Work-home resources model further suggests that key resources strengthen the positive effects of contextual work resources (Kwan et al., 2022; Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). Key resources are management resources that “facilitate the selection, alteration, and implementation of other resources” (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012, p. 548). Humble leaders are concerned with employees’ personal growth and development and offer assistance for such development (Chughtai and Arifeen, 2023; Owens and Hekman, 2016), followers with high promotion focus are more likely to interpret expressed humility positively and optimally utilize these contextual resources (He et al., 2023). Because promotion-focused individuals are motivated by development, growth, accomplishment, and self-actualization (Higgins, 1997; Lanaj et al., 2012), and are sensitive to the presence and absence of resource gains (Chen and Powell, 2012; Higgins, 1997). Hence, the development opportunities and guidance provided by humble leaders align with the promotion-focus...
mindset, thereby creating a regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000), which helps enhance employees’ positive perceptions of humble leadership (He et al., 2023), and in turn enhances thriving at work (Wallace et al., 2016).

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we add to the literature on humble leadership by exploring the positive work–family spillover effects of humble leadership for the first time. In doing so, we can extend the outcomes of humble leadership to the family domain. Second, this study uncovers a critical intervening mechanism underlying the process by which work–family enrichment is enhanced and reveals the mediating role of thriving at work in the relationship between humble leadership and work–family enrichment. Existing studies devoted more attention to the cognitive processes through which humble leadership influences employees’ job attitudes and behaviors. Third, we identify a specific individual trait, promotion focus, as a key factor in explaining the differential responses of employees to humble leader behaviors. This approach also answers the call for a deep understanding of the boundary conditions of humble leadership (Kelemen et al., 2023).

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1 Humble leadership and thriving at work

Thriving is a psychological state characterized by the joint experience of vitality and learning at work (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Vitality, as a positive, activated affect, refers to the positive feeling of having energy and reflects a sense of spirit, feeling alive and awake (Walumbwa et al., 2020; Niessen et al., 2017), while learning refers to the sense that one is acquiring and can apply knowledge and skills (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2020). The two dimensions together “capture both the affective (vitality) and cognitive (learning) essence of the psychological experience of personal growth” (Porath et al., 2012, p. 251). Thriving stands out theoretically and empirically from other growth-related constructs, such as flowing, flourishing, subjective well-being, resilience, and self-actualization (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Niessen et al., 2017), by emphasizing the concurrent importance of vitality and learning. Spreitzer et al. (2005) developed a socially embedded model of thriving at work, illustrating how stable work characteristics and resources produced in the doing of work enable thriving, which subsequently fosters health and well-being. According to this model, positive relational interactions during work are integral to thriving. Given that interactions between employees and their supervisors are among the most crucial (Lu et al., 2023), leaders play a crucial role in promoting employee thriving by shaping the immediate work context (Spreitzer et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2020). Additionally, the results of a meta-analysis demonstrated that various leadership styles, such as empowering leadership, transformational leadership, and leader-member exchange, are significantly associated with thriving at work (Kleine et al., 2019).

Humble leadership, a recent evolution of follower-centric leadership, is often conceptualized as “expressed humility”, involving observable behaviors interpreted by followers (Owens et al., 2013). Considering the relational orientation of humble leader behaviors, we expect that humble leadership will enhance employee thriving at work for three reasons. First, due to their higher status and direct involvement and interactions with employees (Chiu et al., 2016), humble leaders are likely to serve as a learning role model (Owens and Hekman, 2016). Specifically, as followers observe their leaders give away some of their power by admitting limitations and mistakes, spotlighting others’ strengths and contributions, and allowing themselves to be taught (Owens and Hekman, 2012), they may “view themselves more objectively, view others more appreciatively, and view uncertainty more openly” (Wang et al., 2017, p. 8), which may enable them to be attentive to others’ ideas and advantages, seek and exchange information with other members (Hu et al., 2018), and engage in continuous learning (Li et al., 2019; Owens and Hekman, 2016). Meanwhile, the positive behaviors displayed by humble leadership reinforce a mode of cooperative, other-
oriented interaction (Owens and Hekman, 2016). Such favorable interactions would facilitate the transfer of social and psychological energy from leaders to followers (Wang et al., 2018), consequently resulting in the followers being energized.

Second, humble leader behaviors convey social cues to followers that are relevant and salient, which helps followers interpret the meaning of their environment (Chiu et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018). Humble leadership, therefore, might foster thriving at work by providing meaning for followers’ work. Work meaningfulness is shaped by meaningful work experiences that involve followers’ interactions with their leaders (Carton, 2018). Appreciating followers’ positive worth and contributions helps them recognize the significance of their contributions to organizational outcomes and acquire a sense of meaning in their jobs (Ali et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2018). Humble leaders communicate self-transcendent goals (Ou et al., 2014), and are more likely to treat their followers fairly and with respect. These meaningful interactions with leaders should result in followers experiencing a strong sense of the meaning of their work (Chen et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2023). Besides, humble leaders emphasize followers’ growth, it is possible that followers are encouraged to think beyond their work roles to the long-term impact they would like to make in their careers, thereby making followers experience meaningfulness in their work roles (Silard et al., 2021).

The socially embedded model of thriving suggests that positive meaning is an important enabler of thriving at work through promoting agentic behaviors (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Third, humble leader behaviors could fuel thriving at work by supporting followers for self-determination. Self-determination theory assumes that human beings have three innate psychological needs – competence, relatedness and autonomy – critical for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Integrating self-determination theory with thriving theory, Spreitzer and Porath (2014) presented an integrative model of human growth at work, which proposes that contextual factors enable more thriving through satisfying individual psychological needs. Expressed humility, the behavioral expression of humility, tends to reflect an “other-enhancing” attitude (Owens and Hekman, 2012; Ou et al., 2014). Humble leaders admit their reliance on others, provide autonomy, and involve followers in decision-making (Jeung and Yoon, 2016; Ou et al., 2014). So that employees have discretion in decision-making in their jobs (Chen et al., 2018). Furthermore, owing to its interpersonal feature, humble leaders are apt to display greater relationship-oriented leadership behaviors (Morris et al., 2005). These displays can be viewed as rewards and favors from supervisors and are thus more likely to foster high-quality leader-follower relationships (Chiu et al., 2016; Qin et al., 2020; Zapata and Hayes-Jones, 2019), thereby leading followers to have a sense of belongingness. Taken together, these tendencies could provide support for the possibility that followers’ needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fulfilled. Based on the above arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Humble leadership is positively associated with thriving at work.

### 2.2 Thriving at work and work–family enrichment

Work–family enrichment occurs when individuals transfer and successfully apply the resources gained in one domain to improve the quality of life in another domain (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Kacmar et al., 2014). Inherent in this definition is that enrichment is bidirectional in nature, encompassing work-to-family enrichment and family-to-work enrichment. This study aims to examine the spillover effect of humble leadership on family roles, thus focusing on work-to-family enrichment. Greenhaus and Powell (2006, p. 80) pointed out that “the generation of resources is a crucial driver of the enrichment process”, and specified two pathways through which resources may transfer to the other role (Zhang et al., 2018). Instrumental path refers to when “a resource can be transferred directly from Role A to Role B, thereby enhancing performance in Role B”, whereas affective path refers to when

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“a resource generated in Role A can promote positive affect within Role A, which, in turn, produces high performance and positive affect in Role B” (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006, p. 80). A recent meta-analysis has found that personal characteristics associated with work could enable enrichment (Lapierre et al., 2018).

Thriving is a temporary psychological state where individuals experience a sense of vitality and learning, serving as a gauge that helps individuals understand whether they are developing in a positive direction (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005). When people thrive, they feel progress and momentum in their work (Carmeli and Spreitzer, 2009). Thriving employees are growing, developing, energized, and engaged (Goh et al., 2022; Kleine et al., 2019; Spreitzer et al., 2012). Spreitzer et al. (2012) supposed that thriving at work is likely to spill over into nonwork life and enrich one’s nonwork life. Specifically, the learning component denotes that individuals can better cognitively crystalize various resources generated from work or acquire knowledge and skills that could readily transfer to and benefit family roles (Siu et al., 2010; Cui and Zhang, 2021; Hyde et al., 2022). Empirical studies have shown that personal learning at work is an important resource that helps individuals better understand family roles, regulate interactions, and fulfill family responsibilities (Kwan et al., 2010; Tang et al., 2016). The component of vitality, as the positive feeling of having energy available and feeling alive, could also benefit nonwork roles through promoting positive emotions (Hyde et al., 2022). Employees with high levels of vitality should coexist with positive affect (Siu et al., 2010). Positive affect increases one’s psychological availability and expands one’s energy, subsequently promoting individuals to be actively engaged in family roles (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Tariq et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2020). Employees with positive affect are inclined to direct their attention outwardly, which stimulates them to care more about their family members (Liao et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2020). Moreover, learning at work and vitality can also contribute to individuals’ physical and mental health (Kleine et al., 2019), which are important physical resources (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006), and may help followers improve their functioning as a family member (Hyde et al., 2022).

H2. Thriving at work is positively associated with work–family enrichment.

Work-home resources model posits that contextual work resources facilitate home outcomes through a gain in personal resources (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). In line with this model, humble leadership can be characterized as an important contextual work resource that provides opportunities for development and feedback, helps followers develop relational, affective and positive meaning resources. Thriving at work has been identified as a personal resource (Hildenbrand et al., 2018; Gerbasi et al., 2015; Niessen et al., 2017), which can be enhanced by contextual and dynamic resources produced in the undertaking of work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Based on the work-home resources model, “personal resources are the linking pins between the work and home domains” (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012, p. 549). Recent theoretical and empirical studies have suggested that leadership plays a prominent role in influencing employees’ work–family interface through personal characteristics (Lì et al., 2017; Kwan et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2016), and thriving at work is associated with work-to-nonwork enrichment (Hyde et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2020).

H3. Thriving at work mediates the relationship between humble leadership and work–family enrichment.

2.3 Moderating role of promotion focus

Promotion focus, typically conceptualized as a chronic, individual disposition, represents one of the two basic self-regulation systems, the other being prevention focus (Higgins, 1997). These two systems operate independently and serve fundamentally different needs (Higgins, 2000; Lanaj et al., 2012). Individuals with a promotion focus are primarily concerned with
advancement, growth, and accomplishment, striving for ideal goals tied to hopes, wishes, and aspirations (Gorman et al., 2012). Promotion focus heightens sensitivity to the presence and absence of positive stimuli, eliciting a range of emotions from cheerfulness to dejection (Brockner and Higgins, 2001). Moreover, focusing on salient goals that are perceived as “gain” or “non-gain” leads promotion-focused individuals to adopt eager strategies to ensure the presence of positive outcomes and ensure against the absence of positive outcomes (Vriend et al., 2023).

Work-home resources model posits that key resources strengthen the positive relationship between contextual resources and personal resources by facilitating the mobilization and utilization of contextual resources (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). High promotion focus motivates individuals to achieve a “gain” and directs their attention toward opportunities for accomplishment and growth (Chen and Powell, 2012; Gamache et al., 2015), which are likely to enhance the positive relationship between humble leadership and thriving at work. Spreitzer et al. (2005) argued that promotion focus may predispose individuals to thrive and be more attracted to conditions conducive to thriving. The core essence of humble leadership involves leaders catalyzing and reinforcing mutual leader-follower development by publicly engaging in the process of learning and growing (Owens and Hekman, 2012), which implies that promotion-focused individuals are especially open to inspiration from this positive role model (Lockwood et al., 2002), and are more willing to utilize the opportunities provided by humble leadership to satisfy psychological needs and achieve their ideal goals, ultimately leading to higher levels of thriving (Spreitzer and Porath, 2014; Wallace et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the existing literature on regulatory fit indicates that individuals experience regulatory fit when their pursuit of goals aligns with their self-regulatory orientation. This alignment enhances the perceived value of their actions (Higgins, 2000). Those with a promotion focus, characterized by a concern for development, a focus on positive outcomes and gains, and a preference for change over stability (Sassenberg and Hamstra, 2017), tend to adopt strategies aligned with expressed humility. These strategies include staying in motion, maintaining an optimistic outlook, and seeking ongoing development (Wang et al., 2018). Regulatory fit experience also results in the feeling of “rightness” and motivates followers to engage more in the tasks at hand (Aaker and Lee, 2006), task engagement, in turn, increases learning and vitality (Niessen et al., 2012). In contrast, low promotion focus may not be congruent with the strategies that humble leaders foster. Individuals scoring low promotion focus will therefore less positively evaluate humble leader behaviors and be less especially inspired by humble leadership (Lockwood et al., 2002; Sassenberg and Hamstra, 2017).

**H4.** Promotion focus moderates the positive relationship between humble leadership and thriving at work, such that the relationship is stronger when promotion focus is high.

Thus far, we have developed the arguments for the effects of humble leadership on follower’s work–family enrichment by increasing his or her thriving at work, and the moderating effects of promotion focus on the relationship between humble leadership and thriving at work. Consistent with the work-home resources model in which key resources can also accentuate the work–family processes from the work domain to the family domain (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012). It is therefore reasonable to propose a moderated mediation model, in which promotion focus moderates the indirect effects of humble leadership on work–family enrichment via thriving at work.

**H5.** Promotion focus moderates the mediating effects of thriving at work on the relationship between humble leadership and work–family enrichment, such that the mediating effects of humble leadership on work–family enrichment through thriving at work is stronger when promotion focus is high rather than low.
3. Method

3.1 Sample and procedures
Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent social distancing policy in China, we recruited full-time employees in scientific and technological enterprises, where humble leadership is more appropriate and greatly expected (Owens and Hekman, 2012) and Chinese employees tend to place a strong emphasis on their family roles (cf. Zhu et al., 2021) via Credamo between October 2022 and December 2022, an online professional research platform similar to MTurk. To alleviate the potential risk of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we adopt a three-wave with a two-week interval, time-lagged design. Specifically, at time point 1 (T1), the participants were asked about humble leadership, promotion focus, demographics, and other control variables. A total of 450 employees agreed to participate in the T1 survey, 450 questionnaires were returned. At time point 2 (T2), we only sent questionnaires to participants who had completed the first wave survey, participants were asked to report on their thriving at work after two weeks. We obtained 386 questionnaires in the T2 survey, a response rate of 85.78%. Finally, two weeks after time 2 (T3), 386 questionnaires were sent to the employees who had completed the second questionnaire. 314 questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 81.35%.

After checking and matching the questionnaires, we obtained a final sample of 292 complete and usable questionnaires. Among the 292 respondents, 42.5% were male. Their average age was 31.1 (SD = 6.11) years, and their average tenure was 5.55 (SD = 3.71) years. Most of the employees possessed Bachelor’s degrees (79.5%), 17.1% possessed a Master’s degree or higher, 2.7% graduated from community college, and 0.7% had a high school education or below. 34.6% of the respondents lived with their parents, and 191 (65.4%) lived with their children. Most of the respondents were married (75.3%), 23.6% did not marry, and 0.9% were divorced. We also investigated the number of children, 25.7% of participants did not have children, 57.9% of participants had one child, 14.7% of participants had two children, and only 1.7% of participants had three children.

3.2 Measures
The constructs were measured using well-established scales, which have been applied and validated in Chinese settings in previous studies. Because all the measures were originally developed in English, we followed Brislin’s (1980) translation–back translation procedure to translate all English scales into Chinese. First, one bilingual scholar translated all items of those constructs into Chinese. Then, another bilingual scholar back-translated those items into English. Last, through comparisons and discussions, we made minor modifications to expressions of items. With the exception of the demographic variables, all responses to the key variables were made using 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Figure 1.
Research model

Source(s): Authors own creation
Humble leadership. A 9-item scale developed by Owens et al. (2013) and later applied by Wang et al. (2018) in Chinese settings, was used to measure humble leadership. A sample item is “My leader actively seeks feedback, even if it is critical.” Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91 in this research.

Thriving at work. A 7-item scale developed by Porath et al. (2012) and later applied by Xu et al. (2020) in a Chinese setting, was used to measure thriving at work. A sample item is “I see myself continually improving.” Cronbach’s alpha was 0.87 in this research.

Work–family enrichment. A 3-item scale developed by Kacmar et al. (2014) and later applied by Zhang and Tu (2018) in Chinese settings, was used to measure work–family enrichment. A sample item is “My involvement in my work helps me to understand different viewpoints, and this helps me to be a better family member.” Cronbach’s alpha was 0.80 in this research.

Promotion focus. A 9-item scale developed by Lockwood et al. (2002) was used to measure dispositional promotion focus. A sample item is “I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations.” Cronbach’s alpha was 0.79 in this research.

Control variables. Following previous studies about the potential influences of demographics on family outcomes (e.g. Kwan et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2016), we controlled for employee gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (years), marital status (0 = single, 1 = married, and 2 = divorced), number of children, living with parents (0 = no, 1 = yes), education (1 = middle school or below, 2 = community college, 3 = undergraduate degree, 4 = Master’s degree and 5 = Doctor’s degree), and job tenure (years).

4. Results
4.1 Descriptive statistics
Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, including the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among the variables. Humble leadership was positively related to thriving at work ($r = 0.59, p < 0.01$) and work–family enrichment ($r = 0.31, p < 0.01$). Thriving at work was positively related to work–family enrichment ($r = 0.49, p < 0.01$). These correlation results provide preliminary support for our hypotheses.

4.2 Confirmatory factor analysis
We conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) with MPLUS 8.3 to ensure the four key variables in our model have satisfactory discriminant validity. As shown in Table 2, the hypothesized four-factor model demonstrated a good fit to the data ($\chi^2_{[428]} = 771.084, p < 0.001$; SRMR = 0.059, RMSEA = 0.052, CFI = 0.912; TLI = 0.905; Hu and Bentler, 1999) and was also superior to alternative models, including (1) when humble leadership and thriving at work were set to load on a single factor, $\chi^2_{[462]} = 1541.460, p < 0.001$; SRMR = 0.089, RMSEA = 0.108, CFI = 0.739; TLI = 0.720; (2) when humble leadership and promotion focus were set to load on a single factor, thriving at work and work–family enrichment were set to load on a single factor, $\chi^2_{[464]} = 1502.816, p < 0.001$; SRMR = 0.088, RMSEA = 0.111, CFI = 0.749; TLI = 0.731; (3) when humble leadership, promotion focus, thriving at work, and work–family enrichment were set to load on a single factor, $\chi^2_{[465]} = 1922.347, p < 0.001$; SRMR = 0.104, RMSEA = 0.112, CFI = 0.648; TLI = 0.624.

4.3 Hypotheses testing
To test our hypotheses, we used MPLUS 8.3 to conduct hierarchical linear regression analyses. The regression results are presented in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that humble leadership has a positive effect on thriving at work. Model 2 showed that humble leadership was significantly and positively associated with thriving at work ($\beta = 0.40; SD = 0.03, p < 0.001$), thus supporting H1.
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<td>−0.02</td>
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<td>0.80**</td>
<td>0.43**</td>
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<td>8. Humble leadership</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−0.18*</td>
<td>0.11†</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Thriving at work</td>
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<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Work–family enrichment</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>−0.13*</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
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<td>0.14†</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Promotion focus</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
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<td>−0.00</td>
<td>0.58**</td>
<td>0.59**</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
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</table>

**Note(s):** N = 292. For employee gender, 0 = male; 1 = female. Marital status, 0 = single, 1 = married, and 2 = divorced. Living with parents, 0 = no, 1 = yes. Education, 1 = middle school or below, 2 = community college, 3 = undergraduate degree, 4 = Master’s degree and 5 = Doctor’s degree. **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

**Source(s):** Authors own creation
Hypothesis 2 proposed that thriving at work has a positive effect on work–family enrichment. Model 5 showed that thriving at work was significantly and positively associated with work–family enrichment ($\beta = 0.70; SD = 0.11, p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that thriving at work mediates the relationship between humble leadership and work–family enrichment. Given H1 and H2, we further tested the indirect effect with the Monte Carlo method, generating unbiased confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effect (20,000 resampling; Preacher et al., 2010). The results indicated that the indirect effect of humble leadership on work–family enrichment via thriving at work was significant ($\beta = 0.215, SD = 0.050, 95\% CI = [0.135, 0.337]$, excluding 0). Thus, H3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that promotion focus moderates the relationship between humble leadership and thriving at work. The results in Table 3 indicate that the interaction between humble leadership and promotion focus was significantly associated with thriving at work (Model 3, $\beta = 0.19, SD = 0.06, p < 0.01$). To better interpret the moderating effect of promotion focus, we conducted a simple slope analysis of its low and high levels (1 SD lower than the mean and 1 SD higher than the mean, respectively). According to the results shown in Figure 2, humble leadership was significantly and positively related to thriving at work when promotion focus was high ($\beta = 0.41, SD = 0.07, p < 0.001$), when promotion focus was low ($\beta = 0.20, SD = 0.04, p < 0.001$), humble leadership was also positively related to thriving at work, H4 was supported.

Hypothesis 5 proposed a moderated mediation model. To test this hypothesis, we generated unbiased CIs of the conditional indirect effect by conducting a bootstrapping based analytic process via MPLUS 8.3 (Preacher et al., 2010). As shown in Table 4, the indirect relationship from humble leadership to work–family enrichment via thriving at work was stronger when promotion focus was high ($\beta = 0.286, SD = 0.071, 95\% CI = [0.174, 0.461]$, excluding 0) than when promotion focus was low ($\beta = 0.143, SD = 0.039, 95\% CI = [0.083, 0.238]$, excluding 0). The difference between the two levels of promotion focus was also significant ($\beta = 0.143, SD = 0.055, 95\% CI = [0.051, 0.275]$, excluding 0). Thus, H5 was supported [1].

5. Discussion
Applying the work-home resources model, this study investigates the work-to-family spillover effects of humble leadership. The results indicate that the relationship between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\chi^2$/df</th>
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<th>SRMR</th>
<th>CFI</th>
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<td>Baseline alternatives</td>
<td>Four factors</td>
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<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Three factors. Humble leadership and thriving at work</td>
<td>1541.460</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>3.336***</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>0.739</td>
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<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Two factors. Humble leadership and promotion focus combined, thriving at work and work-family enrichment combined</td>
<td>1502.816</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>3.239***</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>One factor. All variables combined</td>
<td>1922.347</td>
<td>465</td>
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<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.648</td>
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Note(s): $N = 292$
Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis results
### Table 3. Results of hierarchical regression analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Controls variables</th>
<th>Model1</th>
<th>Thriving at work</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Model2</th>
<th>Thriving at work</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Model3</th>
<th>Thriving at work</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Model4</th>
<th>Work-family enrichment</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Model5</th>
<th>Work-family enrichment</th>
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<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.01</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.01</td>
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<td>Marital status</td>
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<td>0.11</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job tenure</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Independent variable |          |                  | 0.40 | 0.03 |        |                  | 0.31 | 0.05 |        |                  | 0.15 | 0.08 |
| Humble leadership   |          |                  | 0.40 | 0.05 |
| Promotion focus     |          |                  | 0.40 | 0.05 |

| Interaction | Humble leadership × Promotion focus | 0.19 | 0.06 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moderator</th>
<th>Thriving at work</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Model4</th>
<th>Work-family enrichment</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
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<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>5.92**</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
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**Note(s):** N = 292. For employee gender, 0 = male; 1 = female. Marital status, 0 = single, 1 = married, and 2 = divorced. Living with parents, 0 = no, 1 = yes. Education, 1 = middle school or below, 2 = community college, 3 = undergraduate degree, 4 = Master’s degree and 5 = Doctor’s degree

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05. Coefficients are unstandardized

**Source(s):** Authors own creation
humble leadership and work–family enrichment is mediated by thriving at work. Promotion focus plays a crucial role in strengthening this indirect relationship.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Our research makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it enriches our understanding of both humble leadership and the work–family interface by conceptually and empirically integrating humble leadership with work–family enrichment. Previous studies have exclusively focused on the work-related outcomes of humble leadership (Chandler et al., 2023; Kelemen et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2022), and related studies have paid more attention to the effects of traditional leadership styles on employees’ family lives (e.g. Kwan et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2016; Tang et al., 2016), our study departs from the extant research by examining the family outcomes of humble leadership and answers the calls of Li et al. (2017) and Kossek et al. (2023) for more research on the effects of new types of leadership on the work–family interface. To the best of our knowledge, we are among the first to link humble leadership with the family domain of employees. This is meaningful because it further integrates leadership and work–family literature and holds implications for coping with work–family issues.

Second, this research contributes to the humble leadership literature by testing a new mediator through which it can exert effects on employees’ family domain. Existing studies on humble leadership have not fully elucidated the mediating mechanisms connecting it with outcomes, focusing mainly on employees’ cognitive processes and emotional states derived.
from social information processing, social learning, and social exchange theory (Keleme
et al., 2023). And these studies have often separately examined the cognitive or affective
processes. Our study extends this literature by proposing and testing thriving at work as a
mediator—a concept drawn from the idea that personal resources explain the relationship
between contextual work resources and home outcomes (Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker,
2012). This expansion of the humble leadership literature could introduce a new framework
to justify how humble leadership impact followers’ family outcomes. Moreover, explicating the
interacting mechanism linking humble leadership to work–family enrichment contributes to
the literature on thriving at work. Much attention currently has been devoted to the work-
related outcomes of thriving at work (Kleine et al., 2019; Tariq et al., 2023; Goh et al., 2022),
scholars have only recently begun to conceptually explore its effects outside of organizations
(Hyde et al., 2022). Given the importance of thriving at work toward human sustainability
(Spreitzer et al., 2012), it is pivotal to expand the outcomes of thriving at work from the work
domain to the family domain.

Third, this study highlights the moderating role of promotion focus and provides
important insights into how individual differences might influence the relationship between
humble leadership and work–family enrichment. Our work demonstrates that although
humble leadership could create resource gains, different individuals will have significantly
different perceptions of the value of these resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Employees with
different levels of promotion focus would have different psychological responses when
interacting with humble leadership (He et al., 2023). The extant literature has identified a
series of boundary conditions under which the impact of humble leadership is strengthened
or attenuated, but these predominantly focused on the attributes of the leaders’ humility
(Keleme et al., 2023), with little attention placed on followers’ characteristics. Given that
humble leadership is characterized by a bottom-up approach (Chandler et al., 2023; Owens
and Hekman, 2012), it is essential to further explore the followers’ traits that fit the inherent
requirements of humble leadership. By examining promotion focus as a moderator, our study
contributes to a deeper understanding of the boundary conditions under which humble
leadership exerts more or fewer effects on employees, and it also responds to scholars’ appeal
for finding more stable moderators that could affect the work–family relationship (Ten
Brummelhuis and Bakker, 2012).

5.2 Practical implications
The empirical findings also have critical managerial implications, particularly in the context
of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has elevated work–family issues to a central focus (Allen
and French, 2023). Humble leadership may be helpful for organizations in uncertain
situations to manage the work–family interface of employees. Our study shows that leader
humility could enrich followers’ family lives beyond its positive impacts on work-related
outcomes. Considering that work–family enrichment matters in boosting individuals’ work
domain consequences and general well-being (Zhang et al., 2018). Special attention, therefore,
should be given to fostering managers’ awareness of the importance of behaving humbly (Liu
et al., 2022). Organizations can build and maintain a learning culture in which humble leader
behaviors may be recognized as strengths and highly encouraged (Owens and Hekman,
2012). In this regard, top managers play a pivotal role in shaping supervisors’ perceptions of
leading in a humble manner by modeling learning and development and providing incentives
for engaging in more humble leadership behaviors.

Furthermore, because humble leadership comprises specific manifested behaviors, it may
be cultivated through trainings. A variety of organizational practices, including leadership
development training, coaching interventions, mentoring, and special workshops, should
thus be enacted for current and newly hired supervisors to increase humble leadership.
Organizations should also consider new personnel selection tools in leader selection that assess managerial candidates’ humility. Managers could hire leaders with humble leadership behavior already exhibited in their current position. These potential supervisors can be identified by talking to their direct supervisors or direct reports and administering a survey to subordinates within the organization, including questions like those used to measure humble leadership in the present study.

In addition, the results reveal the mediating role of thriving at work in the relationship between humble leadership and work–family enrichment. To capitalize on this insight, organizations are well-advised to reinforce humble leader behaviors. Such leaders foster a climate characterized by trust, openness, and recognition, where followers feel more inclined to take risks in engaging in learning behaviors. An emphasis on personal growth and development is also facilitated through the provision of opportunities and guidance (Chughtai and Arifeen, 2023; Owens et al., 2013). When employees experience increased energy and learning through interactions with humble leaders, their thriving at work will be enhanced, which could spill over to family domain, ultimately leading to work–family enrichment.

Finally, the results of the moderating effect of promotion focus on the relationship between humble leadership and thriving at work, suggesting that humble leadership pay attention to their followers’ dispositions. For employees characterized by high promotion focus, humble leadership will be more effective in promoting thriving at work. Organizations should attach importance to selecting employees who have high chronic promotion focus as this helps to establish workforces that are more susceptible to positive humble leadership and would take an active role in thriving at work (He et al., 2023; Sassenberg and Hamstra, 2017; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Managers of promotion-focused employees need to be especially humble in their leading roles.

5.3 Limitations and future directions
There are still some limitations to this study. First, although data were collected at three time points, the correlational nature of the study cannot justify a causal claim. Future researchers should conduct experimental or quasi-experimental studies to allow for stronger causal inferences. Second, while positive leader behaviors have the potential to enhance followers’ quality of life and mitigate work–family conflict (Kwan et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2016), our study focuses solely on the positive side of the work–family interface. It is essential for scholars to explore the impact of humble leadership on both the positive and negative dimensions of the work–family interface, recognizing that work–family enrichment and conflict are not necessarily opposing ends of a continuum (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Also, our study only tests the work–family spillover effects of humble leadership instead of the crossover effect, researchers could develop a more complex model to systematically investigate the effects of humble leadership on family domain. Third, the sample was taken from Chinese organizations, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Chinese people have high levels of familism (cf. Liao et al., 2016). As individuals tend to apply resources to a salient role (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). It seems possible that Chinese employees may benefit more from thriving at work than Westerners. Cross-cultural research studies should be conducted to examine the external validity of our findings. Finally, when examining the relationship between thriving at work and work–family enrichment, we do not consider possible moderators. Recent theoretical studies indicate that thriving at work may pull individuals into engaging in more work and leave little resources available for nonwork activities, ultimately resulting in work-nonwork conflict (Hyde et al., 2022; Porath et al., 2012). A promising area for future research involves identifying key boundary conditions, such as boundary segmentation preferences or boundary strength, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between thriving at work and nonwork outcomes.
Note
1. We also tested the relationship of focus variables (without control variables) to ensure the robustness of our model. The results showed that humble leadership was positively related to thriving at work ($b = 0.45, p < 0.001$), thriving at work was positively related to work-family enrichment ($b = 0.45, p < 0.001$).

We also removed the control variables and examined the indirect effects of the focus variables. The results showed that thriving at work mediates the relationship between humble leadership and work-family enrichment (estimate $= 0.241; 95\% \text{ CI} \in [0.151, 0.375]$).

We further removed the control variables and examined the conditional indirect effects of humble leadership on work-family enrichment via thriving at work at higher and lower levels of promotion focus. The results showed that the indirect effect of humble leadership on work-family enrichment via thriving at work was significant and positive at higher levels of promotion focus (estimate $= 0.227; 95\% \text{ CI} \in [0.202, 0.530]$), and at lower levels (estimate $= 0.129; 95\% \text{ CI} \in [0.090, 0.243]$). The difference between these indirect effects was significant (estimate $= 0.182; 95\% \text{ CI} \in [0.080, 0.325]$).

References


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