

# The Effect of Ethical Leadership on Subjective Wellbeing, Given the Moderator Job Satisfaction (A Case Study of Private Hospitals in Mashhad)

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## Research article

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# Abstract

**Background:** The emerging ethical leadership, a novel approach in leadership perspective, has provided the ground for building and promoting individual and organizational effectiveness through prioritizing ethics in organization. The purpose of the study is survey of effect of Ethical Leadership on Subjective Wellbeing, Given the Moderator Job Satisfaction in Private Hospitals in Mashhad

**Methods:** This research, employing a descriptive-correlational survey design, was conducted in 2015-2016 to examine the probable effect of ethical leadership on subjective wellbeing and job satisfaction (both as the outcome variable and the mediator) among the nurses of private hospitals in Mashhad, Iran. The statistical population included all nurses of private hospitals in Mashhad city (730 nurses, in total) from among whom following a simple randomized method, 166 nurses were selected as a sample of respondents. The data were collected with the adapted version of the questionnaire designed by Yang (2014) the validity and reliability of which were tested and confirmed. For data analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used.

**Results:** The results indicated a positive significant relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction. Ethical leadership only indirectly and through job satisfaction positively and significantly affected the subjective wellbeing of nurses.

**Conclusions:** This suggests that an emphasis on ethics and ethically-oriented leaders in hospitals, aided by job satisfaction, can provide a positive climate which can lead to the subjective wellbeing of nurses.

## Background

For Adopting to the environment and the survival, organizations must have organizational health which is fulfilled through the law or ethics and also effectiveness of ethics would be better in organization long term success. Ethics consideration plays a vital role which makes it possible to distinguish good and bad behavior. However, leaders of organizations should be bound to an acceptable morality with no expectance and be a key source of ethical guidelines for the personnel. On the other hand, recent scandals have caused a new interest getting promoted in topics including Altruism, honesty, empowerment, fairness and justice [1]. This led to exploration of ethical leadership concept in the early 20st century [2]. Subjects such as Ethical leadership, Ethical leader behavior, Leadership ethics, Moralized leadership, Responsible leadership and Managerial ethical leadership, Social responsibility have been suggested [3]. Expectations and functional objectives have been completely determined In the ethical leadership of responsibilities and inferiors are aware of duties and expected function level [4]. These leaders always emphasize on justice among concerned ones in and out of organization, improvement personnel, participation of concerned ones and creating social responsibility [5].

Fidelity to Ethical values, ethical leadership feature which encourage personnel to improve their function by fair behavior and will always consider personnel's' benefits, promote justice and friendship among them in an indirect manner in order to trust in him.

On this path, ethical norms are considered in every aspect and through the social learning mechanism, transfers to the inferiors that the personnel are also eager to act according to their leaders' behavior. Ethical management is not a manager's behavior only, but also is meant to high ethical standards of his. In addition to effective preventive attempts on followers' ethical behaviors, they also prosecute ethical guidelines-based connections and imposing the responsibility of the personnel [6]. According to theory of social learning personnel will learn the way of interacting with others through important audiences' behavior imitation and monitoring namely organizations' leaders' [7]. However should be mentioned that experimental experience of this theory specifically about ethical leadership hasn't been evaluated enough [8]. Nowadays promotion of ethical leadership is under consideration in every management levels [9] and researchers believe that these leaders play a vital role.

Ethical leadership and its behavioral dimensions are linked to the various attitudes and behaviors of followers, including organizational commitment, satisfaction with leader, trust in Management, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior [10]. Corporate directors and managers should learn to recognize the value and significance of ethical leadership in a firm, an area that has received increasing attention in corporate world. They should integrate ethical leadership into the core values and visions of the firm, as well as the basic norms of the business. As well as establishing, endorsing and communicating the value and meaning of ethical leadership throughout the firm, directors and top managements themselves should be actively engaged in meaning-making and practices of good ethical leadership and should also show a good ethical management skill in general [11]. Achieving a state of inner wellbeing is among the ultimate purposes of human life, which is also sought in career and professional life [12]. In fact, enjoying high levels of wellbeing is a major indicator of one's social progress [13]. Wellbeing is a mixture of motivation and an agreeable feeling which points to an emotional state suggesting that a low level of wellbeing negatively affects organization [14]; that is because workers experiencing poor health and wellbeing at work may be less productive, make lower quality decisions, be more prone to absence from work and make consistently diminishing overall contributions to organization [15]. In organizations, research on job satisfaction represents a hedonic approach to understanding psychological wellbeing: job satisfaction is defined in terms of employees' subjective judgments on their work situations [16]. Job-specific wellbeing signifies one's feeling about oneself in relation to job [14]. In a body of research, salient components of job wellbeing, such as job involvement and satisfaction, are considered as the key factors in shaping subjective wellbeing that includes life satisfaction [12]. Nurses are vital components of health-care systems, forming the largest group of professionals in a hospital. Nurses are vital components of health-care systems, forming the largest group of professionals in a hospital [17]. This study, consistent with the mainline research on subjective wellbeing, which assumes a connection between ethical leadership style and nurses' subjective wellbeing, seeks to find out whether in the understudy organization ethical leadership influences a Nurse's wellbeing and job satisfaction, while the mediating role of job satisfaction is taken into account.

## **Ethical leadership**

In the current decade, due to some valuable outcomes provided by ethical leadership such as job satisfaction [18, 19], and organizational commitment [20], a growing number of organizations have shown an interest in improving leader's effectiveness [21]. Some potential positive consequences of ethical leadership are job satisfaction, employee wellbeing, as well as enhanced individual and organizational performance [22, 23].

From a social learning perspective, ethical leaders consider as role models shaping appropriate behaviors and norms in an organization [24]. Ethical leadership in this point of view defined as the affirmation and promotion of normatively appropriate behavior to followers throughout personal and interpersonal context by two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making[11, 23, 24, 25].

Ethical leadership is more than behaving well [24]; An ethical leader combines practical wisdom with moral will, and ethical skills and then finds the right thing [26]. Ethical leaders are thought to be honest and trustworthy. Beyond that, ethical leaders are seen as fair and principled decision-makers who care about people and the broader society and who behave ethically in their personal and professional life [24].

This leadership style can be conceived of in more concrete terms by a triple behavioral dimension: the first key feature is leader's 'fairness,' described as being fair, trustworthy and honest. In other words, ethical leaders treat others with respect, do not discriminate among others and make fair choices. The second feature is leader's 'power sharing' behavior. Ethical leaders give team members a voice, listen to their input, and allow them to take part in decision-making on issues concerning their tasks. Finally, ethical leaders tend to work transparently, clarify expectations, and communicate openly so that followers understand what is desirably expected from them. This aspect of ethical leader's behavior is labeled 'role clarification.' [10]. Ethical leaders are promoters of values such as inclusion, collaboration, and social justice [27]. The mechanism or process through which the right values and behaviors are promoted among followers is explained based on the social learning theory [28]. According to this theory, followers tend to pay attention and emulate the attitudes, values, and behaviors of their ethical leaders because their attractiveness and credibility as role models and source of guidance draw attention to their modeled behavior [24].

### **Ethical leader and subjective wellbeing**

The scientific study of subjective wellbeing has highly expanded in recent years. Various factors have been investigated as possible correlates, causes or consequences of subjective wellbeing [13]. "Happiness" is a lay construct, replete with personal meaning for each of us. In literature, happiness has been generally treated as psychological wellbeing (PWB), also referred to as emotional wellbeing or subjective wellbeing. It is a subjective experience including both the relative presence of positive emotion and the relative absence of negative emotions. And finally, it is a global judgment of one's life as a whole. Recent research has consistently demonstrated that high levels of PWB can boost performance on the job, while simultaneously increases each individual's capacity to appreciate new opportunities and experiences [29]. Subjective wellbeing, in working and organizational environments, refers to the

employee's perception and evaluation of the quality of (working) life, social and psychological functioning in those environments [30]. Leaders, managers, supervisors, and employees alike believe that making employees happier and healthier would enhance their effort, contributions and productivity. On the other hand, employee wellbeing works out its impact on performance and permanence of organizations indirectly through reducing the costs associated with illness and health-care, absenteeism, turnover, while promoting discretionary effort, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance. Accordingly, leaders and managers dedicate substantial organizational resources to boost such a positive feeling in various ways, from professional development and employee recognition practices to healthcare benefits and free employee assistance programs [16].

Prior research gives evidence on the association between leader's behavior and employee's wellbeing, and the impact of leadership styles, including transformational and ethical leadership, on the employee's subjective wellbeing [e.g. 14, 31]. As the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory suggests, people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources [32]; Resources, then, are the single unit necessary for understanding stress. *Resources are* defined as those objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies valued by the individual or those that serve as a means of attaining these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies [32]. Resources are "objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies valued in their own right or valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources"[33]. COR theory states that resources, such as ethical leadership, help employees to obtain more resources. This starts a positive spiral of resources, which can positively influence wellbeing [14]. Ethical leaders are humanitarian, honest and trustworthy. They encourage employees to express their worries and make just decisions on issues of concern and importance to employees [22]. In doing so, ethical leaders are fair and honest and provide employees with a safety net to fall back on when they experience low levels of wellbeing at work. Thus, employees receive help, care, and emotional support from their leader. Ethical leaders can therefore provide job resources by successfully defending employees, protecting them from unfairness or mobilizing job resources, which positively affect employee's wellbeing [14]. Now, in the light of the above-mentioned background, the following hypothesis is made:

Hypothesis 1 – The direct superior's ethical leadership has a significant effect on the subjective wellbeing of nurses.

### **Ethical leadership, job satisfaction and subjective wellbeing**

Job satisfaction is a multidimensional concept associated with a variety of psychological and social factors [32]. It is among the most common subjects of analysis in the field of organizational behavior [33]. It is a kind of assessment or appraisal that an individual employee makes of (one's) work [34]. And is a concept associated with people's feelings about their job [22]. According to Robbins and Coulter (2007), job satisfaction is an employee's general attitude to his/her job [35]. Earlier studies found a significant relationship between ethical leadership style and various organizational achievements, including job

satisfaction [36]. Indeed, it is the leader's ethical behavior that either directly or indirectly influences followers' job satisfaction. Yet in this relationship, there are certain moderating variables such as organization's ethical climate [23, 9]. Thus, ethical leaders are of influence in an employee's attitude and behavior and ethical leadership is positively associated with job satisfaction [24].

The positive relationship between ethical leadership and ethics at an organization level, with followers being pleased with the leader, was also among the results of the research by Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2011) [36]. They, additionally, concluded that the significant relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction was due to the important role that leaders played in modeling organizational culture and climate. Ethical behaviors of managers, such as honesty, fairness, empathy, effective listening to and caring for others, being considerate, and modeling ethical behavior will result in an employee's confidence and assurance and reduce their anxiety when confronted with uncertainty accompanied with the moral challenges of work [36]. Kim and Brymer (2011) consider ethical behaviors of leaders to be involved in an employee's enhanced job satisfaction and contentment with the current working condition and amount of payment [23]. Hence, in line with previous research findings, the following hypothesis is made:

Hypothesis 2 – The direct superior's ethical leadership has a significant effect on the job satisfaction of nurses.

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) is a compound term used to express life satisfaction, happiness, presence of positive affect, and absence of negative affect. Although in the organizational literature the relationship between job satisfaction and each of the SWB sub-dimensions has been consistently testified [37, 28, 39], the strength of this relationship largely varies from study to study. For example, the job satisfaction and life satisfaction correlations reported so far ranged from .16 [40, 41] to .68 [39]. Similarly, the magnitude of the relationship between *job satisfaction* and SWB's dimensions *happiness* [42, 43], the *presence of positive affect* [44, 45] and the *absence of negative affect* [46, 47] is highly inconsistent across studies [48]. As the effect of job satisfaction and its moderating role in the relationship of ethical leadership and subjective wellbeing continues to occupy the mind of the management and organizational scholars as a research question which needs more clarification, we lastly make the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 – Job satisfaction significantly mediates the effect of ethical leadership on the subjective wellbeing of nurses.

Given the above three main hypotheses, the research conceptual model is presented as follows:

## Methods

The present applied research was conducted as a descriptive-correlational survey in which the data were analyzed through covariance matrix using structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. The nurses of private hospitals in Mashhad (i.e. Bent-ol-Hoda, Mehr, Sina and Razavi hospitals) who were a sum of 730 in number comprised the statistical population of the present study. Given the limited number of population, the sample size was determined using Cochran formula for finite population. In this sampling

procedure, first, a preliminary sample of 30 questionnaires of representative subjects were pretested and then, by replacing its error level for 5% in Cochran formula, the sample size was accurately estimated at 95 percent confidence interval and significance level of 5 percent, giving a sample size of 157 persons. However, anticipating that a certain number of the questionnaires may not return, 200 questionnaires were actually distributed among nurses. Of these questionnaires, 166 completed questionnaires were eventually used in the analysis phase. Standard measures in Yang (2013) were used to measure the variables. In order to apply these measures to the Iranian society, they were adapted using translation – back – translation method. The face and content validity of the final questionnaire was verified using experts' views. Job satisfaction, ethical leadership, and subjective wellbeing were measured with 4, 9, and 4 items, respectively. In addition, using the content-face validity method, the construct validity of items was examined and confirmed by a number of management professors and some of the nurses working in private hospitals of Mashhad. In testing construct validity, a confirmatory factor analysis was used. The reliability (internal consistency) was tested using Cronbach's alpha. The calculated alpha of the questionnaire was .81 which confirms its adequate reliability. In Table 1, calculated Cronbach's alphas are presented per variable, and in Table 2, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis are presented. It should be noted that all the items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Data analysis tests, including Pearson correlation coefficient was used to estimate zero order correlation coefficients. SEM was run along with the tests of goodness of fit in structural equations in AMOS v.20. The test of job satisfaction mediating effect and all other analyses was run in SPSS v.19.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

Respondents' demographic information was analyzed in terms of 4 variables: gender, age, education and years of service. Thus, a general picture of the participants was provided in this study. According to the descriptive analysis, There were more women than men; Most people were between 20 and 30 years old; Most respondents had a bachelor's degree in education and most respondents had less than 5 years of work experience.

Table 1 presents Cronbach's alpha, mean response and the respective standard deviation of each variable. Note that the Cronbach's alpha for job satisfaction was initially .42, but after the exclusion of one item it rose to .82.

**Table 1** - Cronbach's alphas, mean responses and standard deviations

Variable	Mean	St. Dev.	Alpha Coef.
(1) Ethical leadership	3.97	.52	.78
(2) Job satisfaction	3.33	.69	.82
(3) SWB	3.25	.68	.80

As it can be observed in the above table, the mean responses for all variables exceed the average level of 3, among which the highest amount belongs to ethical leadership.

### The Measurement Model:

As the presence of a pairwise linear correlation between variables is a necessary assumption in applying the latent variables method in structural equation modeling (SEM), first, for each pair of variables, Pearson correlation test was run and the result is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** - The results of Pearson correlation test

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Ethical leadership	-	.184*	.103
(2) Job satisfaction	.184*	-	.560**
(3) SWB	.103	.560**	-

**Note:** \*\* [one-tailed] correlation at significance level of  $p < 0.01$ ; \* correlation at significance level of  $p < 0.05$

As Table 2 shows, the strongest correlation is that of job satisfaction and SWB ( $r = 0.560$ ), and the smallest correlation exists between SWB and ethical leadership ( $r = 0.103$ ). In addition, all the estimated paired correlation coefficients are positive and significant.

Before the actual SEM analysis, significance of the regression weight (factor load) for different constructs of the questionnaire needs to be estimated to make sure of the model goodness of fit for the estimation of constructs. This is done using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS. In the fitted CFA model, the regression weight of all constructs, except item 9 of ethical leadership was significantly different from zero (at 99% confidence interval). Thus, item 9 from ethical leadership and item 1 from job satisfaction were excluded from the analysis. The criterion for item significance is that the significance

level should be below the threshold level of .05. Thus, 20 items from the questionnaire were taken for analysis. Table 3 presents CFA results for significant items together with the goodness of fit indices of the model. The indices indicate the goodness of fit and thus the significance of factor loading of each observed variable relative to the corresponding latent variable was confirmed.

To examine the validity of the questionnaire through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), first, normality of the collected data was confirmed which was tested by two measures of skewness and kurtosis in AMOS. The obtained skewness should be within the range of -3 and +3) and kurtosis should range between -3 and +3). In the next step, the model's construct validity was examined based on the convergent validity of each factor load (regression coefficients) which should be equal or above .5, and divergent (discriminant) validity in which, to make sure no overlap exists between the constructs with regard to the measured items, the correlation between each pair of constructs should not exceed .9. Finally, the model's goodness of fit was tested. Table 3 summarizes CFA results for the items. Firstly, considering the kurtosis in Table 3 which is between -3 and +3 for items and their skewness which lies between -1 and +1, the normality of collected data is confirmed. Secondly, given the fitted model and factor loads which all exceed .5, except item 9 which due to an acceptable compound validity (>.6) is not discarded, the convergent validity of the questionnaire is confirmed. In addition, since the paired correlations between variables are all smaller than .9, there is no overlap between the variables and as a result, the discriminant validity of the questionnaire and in sum, its construct validity is confirmed by the author. Moreover, the goodness of fit indices lies within the acceptable ranges, indicating that the model is adequately fit and applicable to estimate the assumed relationships between variables.

**Table 3** – The results of confirmatory factor analysis of the questionnaire's items

Construct	Items	Kurtosis	Skewness	Factor loads	Sig.	Decision comment
Ethical Leadership	1	-.553	-.755	.601	.026	Significant
	2	.954	-.801	.533	.000	Significant
	3	1.815	-.939	.514	.000	Significant
	4	.401	-.678	.527	.000	Significant
	5	-.271	-.180	.607	.000	Significant
	6	1.158	-.701	.678	.000	Significant
	7	1.938	-.943	.731	.000	Significant
	8	.626	-.744	.630	.000	Significant
	9	.955	-.958	.404	.000	Significant
Job Satisfaction	10	-.065	-.710	.700	.000	Significant
	11	-.030	-.601	.678	.000	Significant
	12	.060	-.643	.754	.000	Significant
Subjective Wellbeing	13	.284	-.680	.753	.000	Significant
	14	.060	-.394	.640	.046	Significant
	15	-.030	-.043	.595	.036	Significant
	16	.060	-.048	.697	.000	Significant
$\chi^2 = 357.795$ ; $df = 184$ ; $\chi^2/df = 1.945$ , GFI=.822, CFI=.828; TLI=.803; IFI=.832; RMR=.094; RMSEA=0 .100						

## Test of hypotheses

To test the research hypothesis, maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) method in structural equation modeling was used in AMOS. During all phases of the research, the covariance matrix formed the basis. In this model, the items were considered as visible variables and the research variables as latent variables. Figure 1 shows structural relationships of the research model. The first model's goodness of fit was estimated by the SEM goodness of fit indices as indicated below:

$\chi^2 = 357.795$ ;  $DF = 184$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.945$ , GFI=.822, CFI=.828; TLI=.803; IFI=.832; NFI=.706, RMR=.094; RMSEA= .076

In an optimal structural equation model, chi-square is non-significant, chi-square/df ratio is smaller than 3, the normed fit index-NFI, comparative fit index-CFI, and goodness of fit index-GFI exceed.85, root mean squared residual-RMR is smaller than.09, and root mean squared error of approximation-RMSEA is smaller than .05. For the fitted structural model, the obtained corresponding values are: chi-square= 357.795, the chi-square-df ratio= 1.945, NFI, CFI, and GFI equal to .706, .828, and.822, respectively, and RMR =.904 and RMSEA =.076, which meets all the above assumptions, attesting to the model's good fit. As mentioned previously, the present research is focused on three main hypotheses among which, two concern the direct associations between the variables. One hypothesis is about the mediating role of job satisfaction in relating two other variables. Figure 2 illustrates the fit SEM model and the strength of assumed relationships between variables. The model estimates confirm the second and third hypotheses, as the assumed relationships between ethical leadership and job satisfaction, and the mediating role of job satisfaction in relating ethical leadership and SWB proved to be both strong enough and significant (i.e.  $p < .05$ ,  $t > 1.64$ ). However, despite the significance of the relationship between ethical leadership and SWB (hypothesis 1), the correlation is so low that, regardless of the minus sign, rejects the first hypothesis for the lack of a clear association.

**Table 4 - Summary of hypothesis testing results**

Relationships	St. coefficient	Sig. value	Sig. level	Conclusion
Ethical leadership - SWB	-.02	3.6	.000	Confirmed
Ethical leadership - Job satisfaction	.37	2.4	.015	Confirmed
Ethical leadership - Job satisfaction - SWB	.27	2.0	.000	Confirmed

Bootstrapping was used in AMOS to test the third hypothesis about the mediating role of job satisfaction in relating ethical leadership and subjective wellbeing (SWB). As is evident in Table 3, in presence of job satisfaction, the relationship between ethical leadership and SWB was significantly boosted, rising from a slightly negative relationship to a significantly positive one. Hence, the third hypothesis on the significance of the mediating role of job satisfaction in relating ethical leadership to SWB is accepted.

## Discussion

These results, seen in a broader context, point to the increasing importance of ethically-oriented leadership in the target organization and healthcare institutions. They realize that appreciating lofty human values, and being supportive and inspiring to nurses and other employees in the healthcare sector would create a feeling of usefulness and efficacy, pave the way for effective task performance and satisfy psychological needs. The ethically oriented approach in leadership has many benefits for organizations, which are more obvious and noticeable in the health management system and the nursing staff due to the dominance of an intimate and strongly emotional atmosphere. The particular working

state and atmosphere of hospitals require such closeness and company among nurses, staff members, physicians, and patients. Naturally, through this closeness, many ethical issues are highlighted. The prevalence of ethical leadership in hospitals makes managers of sections and units further committed to ethical principles and somehow set an example for team members. We may then expect practice of ethical behaviors from nurses and staff members. Leadership, by definition, means influence and persuasion of others as distinguished from management by its emphasis on voluntary compliance of team members. Indeed, leadership behavior, in itself, is effective, supportive, stimulating and significant and when seasoned by the consideration of ethics and as an ethical model, it takes a more pleasing color which significantly contributes to the establishment of ethical rules in the organization. Our results, in general, support the promotion of ethical leadership in private hospitals through formal planning and top management initiatives both for the good of employee's working conditions and the quality of the services provided.

## **Conclusion**

In this research, the correlation of ethical leadership and job satisfaction, and also with subjective wellbeing with and without the nursing staff's job satisfaction as the mediator was examined in Mashhad. The results indicated significant correlations between the variables. Despite the significance of ethical leadership and SWB correlation, the correlation was close to zero. Thus, the first hypothesis could not be accepted. However, this correlation, when mediated by job satisfaction, got much stronger.

## **Declarations**

### **Availability of data and materials**

Data will not share. For having this data, please contact AK at [kafashpor@um.ac.ir](mailto:kafashpor@um.ac.ir)

### **Abbreviations**

Not applicable

### **Declarations**

Not applicable

### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

This work is supported by grant NO.52087 from Vice president for Research &Technology .The ethical protocols were approved by the Ethics Committee of. We reviewed all 166 completed questionnaires admitted to Ferdowsi university of Mashhad between 13/3/2018 and 20/8/2018 after approval of ethical committee of Human Research (NO. 52087), the study was carried out based on data collection from Mashhad private hospitals.

## Consent for publication

The License agreement is supplementary to No. 10

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Funding

Not applicable

## Authors' contributions

SS carried out statistical analyses of the data and involved in the interpretation of data nurses. AK designed the study and performed the histological examination of the Ethical Leadership, and was a major contributor in writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Figures

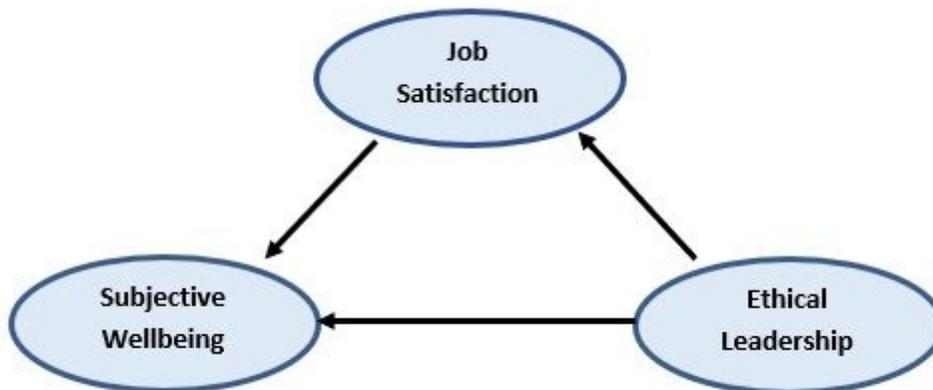


Figure 1

Research Conceptual model (Source: Yang, 2013)

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