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Abstract

Organizational trends such as flattening and decentralization are challenging traditional theories and practices of organizational ethics, and have given rise to a new issue in organizational management: moral authority with employees as the primary agents. As an informal form of authority, moral authority breaks through the limitations of formal authority in terms of hierarchy, direction, and scope, thereby realizing cross-hierarchical, omnidirectional, and boundaryless ethical reshaping effects. However, moral authority has not yet received sufficient attention in management research. In response, this study constructs and tests a theory of moral authority based on the research framework of “concept construction–formation mechanism–cross-level evolution–multilevel effects.” First, it defines the concepts of “moral authority” and “moral authority team generalization” and develops corresponding measurement instruments. Second, it examines the formation mechanisms of moral authority and reveals how it affects the team collective through the path of “social judgment–social identification–social influence,” thereby achieving team-level generalization. Finally, it empirically tests the multilevel effects, mechanisms of action, and boundary conditions of moral authority team generalization on individual psychology, team efficiency, and organizational systems. Theoretically, this study expands a new domain of research in organizational ethics; in practice, it provides enterprises with a novel approach to ethical governance that leverages micro-level influences to drive system-wide change.

Full Text

The Concept, Formation, Cross-Level Evolution, and Multilevel Impacts of Moral Authority from an Employee-Centric Perspective

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Abstract: Trends of organizational flattening and decentralization are challenging traditional theories and practices of organizational ethics, giving rise to employee-based moral authority as a new topic in organizational management. As an informal form of authority, moral authority transcends the limitations of formal authority in terms of hierarchy, direction, and scope, achieving an ethical reshaping effect that spans hierarchies, directions, and boundaries. However, moral authority has not yet received sufficient attention in management studies. In response, this study constructs and tests a theory of moral authority based on the research framework of “concept construction–formation mechanisms–cross-level evolution–multilevel impacts.” First, it defines the concepts of “moral authority” and “moral authority team norming” and develops corresponding measurement tools. Second, it examines the formation mechanisms of moral authority and reveals how it influences team collectives through the path of “social judgment–social identity–social influence,” thus realizing team-level norming. Finally, the study empirically investigates the multilevel impacts of moral authority team norming on individual psychology, team efficiency, and organizational systems, as well as its underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions. This study theoretically expands the field of organizational ethics research and, in practice, provides businesses with a new approach to ethical governance that can drive large-scale change through small, localized interventions.

Keywords: moral authority, moral authority team norming, employee-centric, cross-level evolution, multilevel influence

Classification: B849: C93

In today' s market environment, characterized by increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), business scandals occur frequently and spread rapidly, causing immeasurable losses to society, economy, and culture. These scandals erode social value systems, trigger public trust crises, threaten corporate profits, reputation, and sustainable development, and damage employee attitudes, performance, and career growth. More concerning is that organizations are often filled with various “moral trivialities” that frequently plunge managers and employees into moral dilemmas—forcing them into difficult choices and 进退维谷 (Gawronski, 2022). Clearly, moral dilemmas widely and frequently trouble management practice. How to ensure that enterprises

and employees adhere to moral principles and how to guide organizations and their members out of moral dilemmas are key issues that contemporary organizational ethics and moral management must address.

Contemporary mainstream organizational ethics research focuses on the role of ethical leadership (Agarwal et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2023), emphasizing that leaders manage and influence subordinates from top-down by demonstrating ethical words and deeds, thereby shaping “goodness-oriented” behavioral norms in organizations. While ethical leadership research has yielded fruitful results, it has limitations in addressing subordinate moral problems. First, leaders’ hierarchical status and top-down perspective limit their insight in identifying organizational ethical issues and their effectiveness in resolving subordinate moral dilemmas. Second, predicting and understanding organizational moral problems solely from the “leader → employee” single direction makes it difficult to form a comprehensive and complete understanding. Third, leaders’ moral standards may not be the highest; organizational ethics research should focus on “those with the highest moral standards” rather than “those with the highest positions.” Fourth, rapid organizational structural changes have made “top-down” formal leadership difficult to keep pace with practical evolution. Therefore, organizational ethics research urgently needs to expand its vision from “formal power granted by position” to “informal influence based on moral cohesion” to more completely and contemporaneously understand moral issues in organizations. Our real life is not short of moral exemplars—such as “Iron Man” Wang Jinxi, an outstanding representative of China’ s working class, and Guo Mingyi, a contemporary role model praised by General Secretary Xi Jinping as “feeling the power of goodness.” They are in grassroots positions but can rely on continuous and consistent moral practice to gather moral influence in organizations and society—both participating in daily work as ordinary employees and gaining others’ conviction and followership as moral authorities. With profound moral accumulation, distinct moral charisma, and prudent moral wisdom, they prompt people to adhere to moral principles and provide action guidance for people to get out of moral dilemmas.

Given the extensive influence and practical significance demonstrated by moral authorities, it is necessary to develop new concepts and construct new theories around “moral authority” in organizations to innovate organizational moral theory and practice. The concept of moral authority early appeared in international political science and sociology. International political science describes moral authority as countries with moral images (such as China, Norway) that can stand on moral high ground to criticize and condemn other countries. In sociology, moral authority initially referred to clergy in religion, who, as agents of religious doctrines, have natural authority (e.g., God is considered the source of moral authority). However, as religious theology has gradually weakened in modern social life and concepts, more and more non-clergy have begun to become moral authorities. Scholars have gradually recognized that moral authority needs to have moral knowledge and ability to identify right and wrong in social behavior, can judge the morality, value, and importance of things, can

clearly express and practice their own moral views, respect and recognize others' ideas, feelings, and behaviors on moral issues, and can help others get out of moral dilemmas.

Existing research still has considerable room for expansion: In research fields, the vast majority of studies concentrate on religion, politics, society, education, etc., while our understanding of moral authority in the organizational domain is very deficient; In research methods, the vast majority are speculative discussions, with almost no studies applying rigorous scientific research methods for empirical testing of moral authority; In research content, most studies only remain at describing the connotation, subjects, and sources of influence of moral authority, with no clear understanding of its antecedents, consequences, mechanisms, and boundary conditions; In conceptual connotation, existing literature has described moral authority differently based on different fields, perspectives, and emphases, resulting in 杂乱不一 (disorderly and inconsistent) conceptual connotations of moral authority, with no unified understanding of “moral authority” having been formed.

In summary, inspired by moral authority ideas from multiple disciplines, this article is based on organizational management contexts, uses rigorous academic paradigms and research designs from organizational behavior, takes “employees” as the main body, and refines research content and conceives research schemes around a series of scientific questions such as “What elements and characteristics does moral authority in organizations possess? How to identify moral authority? What is the formation process of moral authority? What influence do they have on organizational members, teams, and organizations? What is the mechanism of action?”

Specifically, first, conceptualize and operationalize the concept of moral authority to lay a conceptual and measurement foundation for subsequent research; second, analyze the antecedent elements and formation process of moral authority and design research on the causes of moral authority; third, develop the concept of moral authority team norming to describe and test the leapfrog influence of moral authority on teams; finally, design and test the cross-level influence, mechanism, and boundary conditions of moral authority and its team norming on multi-level subjects. Through the above research design, this article jumps out of the long-term limitation of organizational ethics research focusing on leadership positions, analyzes the core issue of “moral authority in organizations,” compensates for the deficiencies of traditional leadership-centric perspectives in “guiding moral behavior” and “solving moral dilemmas,” complements ethical leadership theory, and jointly promotes the innovation of organizational ethics theory and the iteration of corporate moral management practice through a combination of “top-down, horizontal, and bottom-up” approaches.

Existing literature on moral authority is scattered across multiple philosophical and social science disciplines. Through computer-assisted retrieval and reference tracking, this article collected 131 Chinese and English literature pieces from databases including ABI/INFORM, JSTOR, PsycInfo, Google Scholar, WOS,

Figure 1

Figure 1: Figure 1

Scopus, Business Source Premier, and CNKI. The distribution across disciplines is shown in Figure 1

. Given that existing literature, due to the attributes and research paradigms of their disciplines, generally lacks quantitative empirical research (such as testing causes and effects), the following review focuses on the conceptual level.

2.1 General Interpretation of Moral Authority

Figure 1 shows the distribution of Chinese and English literature on moral authority across disciplines. “Moral authority” is a compound concept consisting of “morality” and “authority.” Broadly, “morality” refers to principles that guide people to judge right and wrong (Hill & Watkins, 2007). Narrowly, “morality” possesses instrumental rationality and value rationality. From the perspective of instrumental rationality, morality is a series of behavioral norms that people consciously abide by when dealing with relationships between people and the external world (e.g., person-to-person, person-to-society), reflecting the value orientation promoted by current society. From the perspective of value rationality, morality is an individual’s pursuit of good and rejection of evil, reflecting the height of individual spiritual values. The former represents group value orientation, a group-contract-based social norm; the latter embodies individual self-value pursuit, a spontaneous personal moral orientation. Overall, morality is a social ideology determined by the social economic base. It evaluates the goodness, rightness, honor, and disgrace of people and things through traditional culture, public opinion, and individual beliefs. It is the sum of norms and principles that adjust relationships between people and the external world.

The term “authority” originates from the Latin “*authoritas*,” meaning “the power and prestige that makes people convinced” or “people or things with status and prestige within a certain scope.” At the spiritual level, authority has internal control power that makes people voluntarily convinced and compliant; at the legal level, authority has fairness, legitimacy, and legality. Authority is an inherent superiority in social systems that defines others’ rights and obligations and judges others’ behavior. Arendt (2006) points out that authority is a foundation that guides the world to be lasting and eternal. People voluntarily follow authority figures, respect their excellent knowledge and abilities, trust and comply with their views, suggestions, and behaviors without needing to rely on coercive force or formal power. For example, Parliament, as an “authority,” does not directly have formal power granted by the state, but due to its long-term experience, wisdom, and noble virtues, it can provide guidance and advice to policymakers, ensure that legal policies follow national historical traditions, and guide the country to develop healthily.

Combining the above interpretations of “morality” and “authority,” this article believes that moral authority, in a broad sense, refers to individuals or groups that are universally granted legitimate status, enjoy high prestige, and have strong convincing power when establishing and judging the normative standards of right and wrong; in a narrow sense, it refers to those individuals whose thoughts and behaviors highly align with the value concepts and behavioral norms promoted by current society, have outstanding moral sense and clear right-wrong judgment ability, and therefore are widely respected and enjoy high status and prestige in their groups.

2.2 Multi-Disciplinary Interpretations of Moral Authority

In the field of philosophy, moral authority can be explained through three theories: First, Weber’ s typology of authority. Weber (2010) constructed a three-dimensional framework of authority in *Economy and Society*—traditional authority (rooted in cultural inertia, such as elders in Eastern culture being more easily regarded as authority figures), charismatic authority (relying on personal traits, such as literary giants, political leaders, scholars, etc.), and legal-rational authority (based on institutional norms, such as laws, policies, moral norms, etc., with fairness, legitimacy, and legality). Weber believed that moral authority promotes voluntary obedience through its recognized moral effectiveness and prestige. It originates from the characteristics of morality itself rather than external coercion, thus having guiding and persuasive power that makes others naturally identify with and follow. Second, Hart’ s (2006) dual-norm theory: coercive logic— “must do,” emphasizing the coerciveness and binding force of rules; value logic— “should do,” endowing rules with moral value. Legal authority relies on external coercive force to constrain behavior, while moral authority relies on internal moral force to achieve guidance. Moral authority completes the internalization from “must” to “should” through the internal value judgment of “should.” Third, Durkheim’ s (2000) moral priority theory, which posits that the essence of moral authority lies in the “moral priority” possessed by individuals. This priority enables them to exert invisible moral influence on others, prompting others to be convinced and consciously comply.

In the religious field, the origin of moral authority can be traced back to religious beliefs and cultural traditions. Religion, as one of the oldest sources of moral authority in society, has long played a central role in defining and interpreting the legitimacy of human behavior. The authority of religious moral systems stems from divine will; the rightness or wrongness of behavior is determined by God’ s commands and judgments. In religious systems, believers usually seek moral guidance and interpretation from authority figures such as clergy and patriarchs, because they bear the responsibility and authority to interpret and maintain moral norms. When religious leaders transmit moral doctrines, they are not only renowned for their excellent wisdom and moral literacy but can also profoundly influence social members’ behavior and value judgments. For example, the Pope’ s moral authority does not come from secular political or

military power but from his moral status as God' s spokesperson. However, as religious theology' s influence on social life gradually weakens, people have begun to turn to other sources of moral authority.

In the political field, moral authority usually refers to leaders with specific influence. These leaders can be administrative heads of countries, groups, or organizations, or core figures in social activities or events. Having a leadership identity is one of the foundations for forming moral authority; otherwise, it may lead to distrust, cynicism, and suppression of people' s initiative. At the national level, citizens' subjective moral evaluation of leaders and the moral status they confer jointly constitute the leader' s moral authority. In political practice, moral authority wins people' s respect, followership, and esteem by proposing and practicing political concepts widely recognized by the public. For example, Mahatma Gandhi became the moral authority of the Indian people by advocating the moral concept of non-violent resistance, inspiring Indians to strive for independence. Scholars in the political field believe that moral authority needs to possess sacrifice, trust, courage, hope, belonging, professional knowledge, goodwill, and political neutrality. Among them, political status, religious belief, and good reputation are three important foundations that constitute moral authority. Moral authority must not only be generated in social interaction and public practice to maintain fairness and justice but also have strong moral judgment ability to provide moral guidance for others.

In the social field, moral authority is usually the initiator or organizer of events, ideas, or activities. They guide others to follow by publicizing and promoting moral concepts. "Authority" essentially reflects an individual' s mastery and application of knowledge in a specific field, able to solve problems through appropriate knowledge and skills. Moral authority should have profound moral knowledge, keen insight into moral truth, and be able to clearly point out what people should and should not do. Social scholars believe that moral authority has the ability to distinguish right from wrong in social behavior and can guide others to make moral judgments. They can not only clearly express and practice their own moral views but also take responsibility for their moral behavior and provide guidance when others face moral dilemmas. They widely exist in society and have important status in specific life and social fields. They can be wise elders, respected leaders, experienced colleagues, or educators. They are the most prestigious and persuasive force in moral life, able to make people voluntarily comply. They make others voluntarily obey based on identification or approval through positive spiritual influence.

In the professional field, moral authority mainly originates from the inherent attributes of specific professions. With the continuous deepening of social division of labor, groups engaged in specific professions such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers are often naturally regarded as representatives of moral authority because their professions inherently contain ethical requirements—such as altruism and selfless dedication. Evans (2021) further points out that people with professional knowledge can become moral authorities at work through three steps:

first, using professional knowledge to clarify the correctness of moral concepts; second, verifying the rationality and effectiveness of moral viewpoints; and finally, explaining the legitimacy of work behavior from a moral perspective and handling related disagreements. This process is particularly significant in the scientific research field, where scientists establish the status of moral authority through both theoretical and practical paths. Theoretical authority mainly influences others by providing professional advice and guidance, and its effectiveness depends on others' identification with the authority's opinions. Practical authority not only provides advice but can also evaluate the rationality of these suggestions and take action to implement or intervene when necessary, thus demonstrating stronger moral guidance. It is evident that to become a moral authority in a certain field, one must not only have solid professional knowledge and skills but also accumulate moral reputation by fulfilling moral obligations and demonstrating moral behavior.

In the business field, enterprises assume the role of moral authority in spreading moral values through clear moral positions, exercising power and platform influence, and gaining recognition from stakeholders. Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019) broadly define moral authority in market contexts as: moral organizational entities potentially influencing others' moral concepts and behaviors through their power and platforms. Moral authority can be either organizational entities (such as companies, brands) or individuals representing organizations (such as CEOs, corporate spokespersons). In a consumer market where there are differences between "ought" and "is," moral authority can provide clear and correct guidance on moral values and actions for others, becoming a learnable market moral role model. Specifically, moral authority includes three elements: Moral identity—determines an entity's moral definition and how to demonstrate morality. Influence, i.e., the ability to change others' thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors, whose magnitude depends on the power and platform the entity possesses. Only when an entity has both power and platform can the potential of moral authority be fully realized. Stakeholder recognition—judges the authenticity of the entity's moral identity and behavior through moral externalization, and then decides whether to grant the entity moral authority. In addition, Hoppner and Vadakkepatt (2019) point out that over time, changes in social norms and market events may enable certain entities to gain moral authority or erode the moral authority of existing entities, making moral authority dynamic.

In summary, from a cross-disciplinary perspective, moral authority has three key aspects: First, the foundation of moral judgment. The foundation of moral authority lies in the correct moral stance held by individuals or groups—this stance needs to be based on objective moral knowledge (such as ethical theories, social norms) and make reasonable judgments on the rightness or wrongness of specific behaviors through moral reasoning ability. This judgment ability is both a criterion for self-discipline and can provide clear moral guidance for others. Second, the source of non-coercive influence. Different from authority that relies on positions, titles, and other formal powers, the core of moral authority

Figure 2

Figure 2: Figure 2

lies in its non-coerciveness. It neither needs to use coercive means to force others to obey nor relies on external hierarchical systems. Instead, the foundation of moral authority lies in profound moral knowledge, excellent moral judgment ability, continuous moral practice, and the resulting accumulated moral reputation. This moral charisma from the inside out can attract others to voluntarily follow based on identification with moral values. Third, special requirements in professional fields. In professional fields, moral authority needs to deeply integrate professional ability and professional ethics. Professional knowledge is a tool to solve specific problems, while professional ethics sets ethical boundaries for it. The combination of the two requires practitioners to serve society with professional skills and embed moral considerations in professional decisions, thus building an authoritative image with both professional credibility and moral appeal. Cross-disciplinary research on moral authority is shown in Figure 2

Figure 2 shows research on moral authority across disciplinary fields. Research on moral authority shows two major trends: First, the research scope expands step by step along the chain of “philosophy-religion-politics-society-profession-business.” Research on moral authority has evolved from the classical foundation of philosophical ontology (such as Weber’s “charismatic authority”) to theological authority in religion (such as the Pope’s moral influence), leadership in the political field (such as political leaders’ moral authority), moral pioneers in social movements, ethical authority in specific professions (such as the inherent moral authority of certain professions), and finally to corporate moral authority in business environments. Second, the research paradigm has experienced a hierarchical evolution of “macro-meso-micro.” Scholars have shifted from focusing on “the broad influence of moral authority in social structure” to “the nature and operating mechanisms of moral authority within specific fields, groups, or organizations,” and then to “ethical decision-making and behavior of individuals in specific contexts, as well as others’ perception and response to moral authority.” The above trends summarize the development path of moral authority research in interdisciplinary integration on the one hand, and on the other hand reveal many deficiencies in existing research in terms of theoretical construction, empirical testing, scientific paradigms, and research fields:

First, moral authority has both cross-disciplinary common factors and exclusive characteristics of each discipline, but existing literature lacks standardized conceptualization research rooted in specific disciplines. Existing research generally believes that moral authority possesses moral superiority and can make others voluntarily convinced and follow without relying on formal power. This phenomenon widely exists in multiple fields such as religion, sociology, and political science. However, there are significant differences in understanding moral

authority across disciplines: religious studies focus more on its sacredness in the belief system, sociology emphasizes its guiding function for social norms, while political science focuses on its influence in national governance. Although the concept of moral authority has certain cross-disciplinary commonalities, its specific connotation, extension, structure, content, and measurement in specific disciplines urgently need further clarification and definition.

Second, current cross-disciplinary research on moral authority is still in its infancy, with an incomplete theoretical system. The vast majority of existing research concentrates on the conceptual level, staying at the description of the definition, characteristics, and structure of moral authority, while systematic analysis and quantitative testing of its generation path, operating mechanism, and impact results are still blank. This lack of research depth directly restricts the completeness and scientificity of the moral authority theoretical framework and weakens the explanatory power and guidance of existing theories in practice. Meanwhile, discussions on moral authority in different disciplines are often limited to their own perspectives, lacking interdisciplinary integration and dialogue, resulting in relatively isolated research findings that have not formed a comprehensive theoretical system. Therefore, future research urgently needs to achieve breakthroughs in theoretical deepening and interdisciplinary integration to construct a more systematic and comprehensive moral authority theoretical system.

Third, existing moral authority research overly relies on deduction and speculation, seriously lacking support from empirical data, causing theoretical ideas to be too “metaphysical” and difficult to implement and operate. In philosophy, sociology, religious studies, and other fields, research methods mostly focus on phenomenon description and speculative discussion. This research model relying on individual cases and speculation easily traps theory in a self-circular logical trap—concepts are repeatedly reconstructed in literature mutual verification but fail to touch the complex mechanisms of the real world. This not only cannot verify the applicability of classical theories in contemporary times but also makes it difficult to cope with challenges from new forms of moral authority in the digital intelligence era. The lack of methodology also triggers a series of problems. For example, the lack of operable measurement tools hinders systematic testing of the influence mechanism of moral authority. In addition, moral authority research without empirical support finds it difficult to play a guiding role in solving practical problems. Therefore, future research urgently needs to introduce positivist paradigms and comprehensively use multiple methodologies to enhance the explanatory power, predictive power, and practical guidance of theories.

Fourth, the phenomenon and value of moral authority have been preliminarily summarized and recognized in political science, sociology, and other disciplines, but they encounter systematic neglect in the organizational management field, which is not conducive to the innovative development of organizational moral theory and management practice. Current organizational ethics research still

adheres to the traditional power management paradigm, regarding “command-obedience” mechanisms such as ethical leadership as the core of ethical governance. This paradigm is experiencing challenges from new trends such as digital intelligence, iteration of business forms and organizational structures, and personalized and diversified employee values. In contrast, moral authority based on “influence-followership” relationships has become unprecedentedly important in the current organizational environment. Especially in interdisciplinary research, the concept of moral authority is not simply copied but needs to be reconstructed based on organizational contexts. Only by deeply solving a series of fundamental problems of moral authority in organizational contexts—including its definition, connotation, structure, emergence mechanism, and influence mechanism—can the leap from “concept borrowing” to “theoretical endogeneity” be achieved. This theoretical construction can not only expand the boundaries of organizational ethics research but also provide new ideas and solutions for organizational ethics management.

This article will construct the basic logical framework and legal relationship system of moral authority theory based on a cross-disciplinary theoretical integration perspective, following the scientific path of organizational behavior and human resource management research, and focusing on new organizational structures such as flattened organizations and teams. The specific conception includes three parts: First, the construction of moral authority and its derivative concepts—building the conceptual framework of “moral authority” and its team norming; Second, the construction and empirical testing of moral authority’s formation mechanism and transformation model—building a three-stage transformation model of “social judgment–social identity–social influence” based on a “cognition-behavior” perspective, revealing how individual-level moral authority rises to team-level moral authority norming; Third, the exploration and empirical analysis of moral authority’s effect mechanism and conditional boundaries, and analyzing the effects, mechanisms, and conditional boundaries of moral authority team norming in three cross-level directions (top-down on team members, horizontal on team states, and bottom-up on organizational systems).

3.1 Conceptual Construction of Moral Authority and Moral Authority Team Norming

Study 1 focuses on the conceptual construction and operationalization of moral authority and moral authority team norming. Reviewing multidisciplinary literature, combining multi-case comparative analysis and grounded theory research (Lakshman, 2007), through collecting multi-source data such as in-depth interviews with organizational members, focus group discussions, and participatory observations, this study extracts the core constituent elements of moral authority in organizational contexts. On the basis of clarifying the two core concepts, it operationalizes them, develops scales and tests reliability and validity, and verifies the structure and dimensional content of the two concepts (the specific scale development procedures are relatively mature and will not be elaborated

in this article).

3.1.1 Conceptual Connotations of Moral Authority and Moral Authority Team Norming

This part aims to clarify the concept of moral authority and summarize its diffusion effect in organizations, thus proposing two closely related core concepts: First, given that existing descriptions of moral authority in various disciplines mostly concentrate on the individual level, and “people” are the basic carriers of moral endowment, moral judgment, and moral practice (Zagzebski, 2012), this article first proposes the concept of “moral authority” at the individual level. Second, considering that teams are the basic units in contemporary organizational structures (Gonzalez, 2022) and the primary management context preset in this study, this article further proposes the concept of “moral authority team norming” at the team level. Based on previous literature and this article’s conception, we define “moral authority” as: In organizations, individuals who possess systematic and rich moral knowledge, whose thoughts and behaviors highly align with the values and behavioral norms advocated by society, have a strong sense of justice and clear right-wrong judgment ability, and are therefore highly respected and enjoy prestige among members. Further, “moral authority team norming” (abbreviated as “moral norming”) is defined as: Out of identification with and trust in moral authority, team members internalize its moral qualities and behavior patterns through continuous observation, learning, and emulation, thereby achieving the improvement and reshaping of the team’s overall morality. It is particularly important to note that this article limits the subject of moral authority to “ordinary members with low formal power” and intentionally excludes managers with statutory authority (even if they themselves are morally noble). This exclusionary setting stems from two considerations: First, to avoid confusion between the formal positional power possessed by managers and the informal influence of moral authority; Second, to adjust the research perspective to ordinary employees and analyze the generation logic and mechanism of moral influence under asymmetric power structures.

The two concepts are both closely connected and clearly distinct. In terms of connection: Moral authority, as a team member, interacts frequently with other members and continuously exerts moral influence, which is the foundation of team norming. Moral authority team norming is a tendency that spreads from point to surface and proceeds step by step—driven by the demonstration of moral authority, team members’ moral cognition/behavior continuously approaches the standards represented by moral authority, driving the improvement of team members’ moral cognition/behavior. Moral authority is the starting point and source of team norming. Influenced by its demonstration and guidance, team members will learn and internalize the moral content it transmits; moral authority team norming is the trend and process of moral authority leaping to the team level and spreading to surrounding people, manifested as the systematic improvement of the team’s overall moral cognition and level. In terms of distinc-

tion: “Moral authority” is defined as an individual-level concept with distinct personality characteristics; “moral authority team norming” is a team-level concept reflecting the common characteristics of the team. Moral authority refers to a person with specific qualities who exerts moral influence; moral authority team norming refers to the dynamic tendency of team members to follow and morally converge. Moral authority manifests as a kind of “influence”; moral authority team norming manifests as a kind of “followership.” Moral authority can break through team/department/level/organizational boundaries to exert influence; moral authority team norming is confined within the team scope.

3.1.2 Structural Dimensions of Moral Authority and Moral Authority Team Norming

Moral authority can be deconstructed from three aspects: First, as a “person” in society, one should possess general or universal moral qualities (Goodwin et al., 2014); Second, as a “member” in a specific organization, one should fulfill the roles and responsibilities assigned by the organization in a given context; Third, as an “authority” in the moral field, one should also possess the ability to exert lasting and profound influence on others. Therefore, this article divides moral authority into three dimensions: The first dimension is “general morality,” referring to an individual’s broad cognition and practical ability at the general moral level, involving the application and understanding of universal moral principles. That is, moral authority possesses generally recognized moral qualities, characteristics, and behaviors in the social field (such as selfless dedication). The second dimension is “professional morality,” referring to an individual’s precise cognition and practical ability in the field of professional ethics, manifested as the in-depth mastery and practice of moral norms for specific professions or fields. That is, moral authority should also possess professional moral literacy that matches the organization/profession, and have professional moral judgment, moral attitudes, and moral practices recognized by organizational members. The third dimension is “authoritative morality,” referring to an individual’s leading cognition and practical ability on moral issues, manifested as a high-level understanding of moral values and the influence that makes others convinced and recognized. That is, authoritative morality reflects the wise moral judgment, decision-making, and execution ability demonstrated in daily life, professional practice, and social interaction. To more concretely describe moral authority, this article figuratively calls general morality the “thickness” of moral authority (taking the meaning of “thick virtue carries all things”), professional morality the “precision” of moral authority (taking the meaning of “excellence through diligence, mastery and proficiency”), and authoritative morality the “height” of moral authority (taking the meaning of “high virtue and great prestige, lofty prestige”), thereby constructing a moral authority structural model composed of three-dimensional vectors of “thickness–precision–height.”

Moral authority team norming is a behavioral tendency and followership of all team members learning from and approaching moral authority. Therefore, we

construct the conceptual structure of moral authority team norming from both cognitive and behavioral levels. That is, moral norming includes two dimensions: “cognitive followership” and “behavioral followership.” The cognitive followership dimension reflects team members’ deep acceptance, identification, and trust in moral authority figures at the psychological level, specifically manifested as internal identification and unconditional followership of their moral principles, knowledge systems, value concepts, and decision-making wisdom. When team members fully identify with moral authority’ s values, moral positions, and viewpoints, they will subconsciously refer to the authority figure’ s moral standards and behavioral paradigms in daily judgment and decision-making. The behavioral followership dimension reflects team members’ imitation, response, and execution of moral authority figures at the behavioral level, manifested as action support for their moral advocacy, behavioral norms, and practical guidance. Team members internalize the performance of moral authority figures in moral practice as their own action guidelines by observing, learning, and imitating specific behaviors. The two dimensions promote and complement each other. Cognition is the psychological premise of behavior—team members’ acceptance, identification, and trust in moral authority’ s beliefs, judgments, and values constitute the internal psychological motivation that prompts them to show followership behavior. Behavior is the external manifestation of cognition—followership behavior and its results, in turn, strengthen members’ beliefs and attitudes toward moral authority through mechanisms such as rationalization, reflection, and attribution, thereby reshaping their cognition.

3.2 Research on the Formation, Influence, and Cross-Level Evolution of Moral Authority

Study 2 revolves around the entire process of moral authority formation and evolution, aiming to construct a multi-level, dynamic theoretical framework covering the formation mechanism of moral authority → the influence process of moral authority → the cross-level evolution of moral authority to team norming. First, the formation of moral authority identity depends on the synergistic effect of internal moral endowment and external moral practice. Internal endowment includes moral awareness, moral priority, and moral complexity; external practice transforms moral cognition into concrete actions driven by moral courage. The unity of the two makes an individual a moral authority. Second, the influence of moral authority on team members can be divided into a three-stage progressive process: Social judgment stage. Members conduct cognitive modeling of moral authority figures through three dimensions: competence, warmth, and reputation; Social identity stage. Team members experience emotional identification and role identification, gradually transforming from bystanders to followers; Social influence stage. Followers accept the informational influence (viewpoint transmission) and normative influence (behavioral demonstration) of moral authority, thereby adjusting their own attitudes and behaviors. Finally, through these three stages of influence, moral authority continuously exerts moral influence on team members, promoting the team norming of moral au-

Figure 3

Figure 3: Figure 3

thority. As moral authority evolves across levels to the team level, the team's overall morality is continuously improved and reshaped. We divide the entire process into two stages and sequentially propose 5 progressive propositions through logical deduction. The overall theoretical model of Study 2 is shown in Figure 3

3.2.1 Research on the Formation Mechanism of Moral Authority (Stage 1)

Figure 3 shows the theoretical framework of Study 2. The formation of moral authority can be analyzed from three aspects: moral awareness, moral priority, and moral complexity.

First, individuals with high moral awareness can perceive and identify potential moral problems in the environment and realize the moral significance and impact of these problems. From the perspective of ethical identification ability, individuals with high moral awareness have keen ethical identification ability. They can quickly identify the moral attributes in situations (such as the fairness of decisions, sense of responsibility in behavior, etc.). Continuous attention to ethics enables them to become identifiers, initiators, definers, and revisers of moral issues. From the perspective of independence of moral judgment, individuals with high moral awareness are independent of external authority (such as organizational commands) and group pressure (such as conformity). Their moral judgments rely on moral principles, making them a “moral compass” for others.

Second, moral priority enables moral authorities to prioritize moral elements when facing interest conflicts and use them as guiding principles for decision-making and action (Deng Weisheng, 2012; Minton et al., 2019). Individuals have multiple role identities in society (such as managers, colleagues, stakeholder agents), and the requirements of each role may be mutually exclusive—i.e., inter-role conflict (Seeman, 1953). Within the same role, there is also a game between moral principles and instrumental goals—i.e., intra-role conflict. Moral priority enables individuals to consistently adhere to and commit to moral principles and moral behavior when facing inter-role and intra-role conflicts in situations with multiple goal conflicts (Werhane, 1999). In addition, individuals with high moral priority demonstrate moral purity in behavioral motivation, dispelling suspicion of “moral performance” and enhancing others' conviction of their moral quality and behavior.

Finally, moral complexity shapes moral authority in two ways. First, moral complexity enables individuals to analyze and understand moral problems from

multiple perspectives (such as personal ethics, social norms, cultural traditions), systematically identifying moral clues and value conflicts (Sonenshein, 2007; Reynolds, 2006). This ability gives individuals a multi-integrated way of thinking, enabling them to make flexible moral judgments in complex situations and improving the accuracy and rationality of ethical decision-making. Second, moral complexity is the core support of “moral imagination” (Werhane, 1999), enabling individuals to creatively propose solutions when facing complex moral problems and provide effective help and support for others. In summary, this study believes that moral awareness, moral priority, and moral complexity shape individuals into moral authorities. Therefore, this article proposes:

Proposition 1: Core traits related to morality—moral awareness, moral priority, and moral complexity—constitute the internal moral endowment of individual moral authority.

Moral courage is an individual’s ability to overcome fear or pressure and actively take moral action when facing moral challenges or threats. Moral courage is the bridge that transforms internal moral quality into external moral practice, helping individuals take practical actions when facing threats, fear, or pressure (Solinger et al., 2020). First, individuals with high moral courage demonstrate a high commitment to moral principles. When facing personal interest losses, they still dare to take decisive actions to correct others’ immoral behaviors (such as exposing fraud), thereby maintaining ethical bottom lines and establishing moral prestige in the group (Sekerka et al., 2009). Second, moral courage stimulates individuals’ ethical agency, enabling them to actively intervene in and define ethical issues, especially in situations where ethical norms are unclear or absent (such as reconstructing team ethical guidelines). This action-oriented approach transforms individuals from moral bystanders to moral leaders. Finally, individuals with moral courage demonstrate continuous moral behavior, still able to adhere to ethical principles and implement moral actions even when facing tremendous pressure from society or organizations. This persistent moral practice helps individuals obtain the role of moral authority. Therefore, this article proposes:

Proposition 2: Moral courage drives the external moral manifestation of individual moral authority.

3.2.2 Research on the Influence Effect and Cross-Level Evolution of Moral Authority (Stage 2)

The influence of moral authority on teams involves team members’ cognition and evaluation of moral authority. Social judgment (competence evaluation, warmth evaluation, and others’ evaluation) constitutes the cognitive foundation for team members’ understanding of individual moral authority and lays the foundation for subsequent social identity and social influence. Competence evaluation is team members’ systematic judgment of moral authority’s morality-related abilities. This evaluation runs through all aspects of team interaction. Team

members observe and evaluate moral authority's moral sensitivity, decision-making ability, and behavioral demonstration from multiple dimensions. For example, when the team faces moral disputes, can moral authority quickly identify the core of the problem and propose solutions; when facing interest conflicts, can they remain impartial and selfless; can they lead by example and set moral models in the team. These observations and evaluations are not static but continuously deepen with ongoing interaction. By listening to moral authority's words and observing their behaviors, team members gradually form a comprehensive cognition of their moral knowledge and abilities. Competence evaluation provides a cognitive foundation for individual moral authority to exert influence. Warmth evaluation is team members' core judgment of the emotional dimension of moral authority, focusing on the care, empathy, and affinity demonstrated in interpersonal interactions. Team members form evaluations by observing whether moral authority cares about others' emotions in daily behaviors, whether they treat people with kindness and inclusiveness, and whether they provide emotional support when others face difficulties. For example, when team members encounter personal difficulties or emotional lows, can moral authority actively express concern and provide comfort; can they create a safe and trusting atmosphere in the team, making members feel respected and understood. Warmth evaluation not only reflects team members' recognition of moral authority's emotional abilities but also reflects their ability to establish emotional connections, providing an emotional foundation for individual moral authority to exert influence. Others' evaluation emphasizes that when forming judgments about moral authority, team members will refer to other members' viewpoints and feedback. Team members indirectly obtain information and adjust their own judgments by listening to other members' evaluations of moral authority, observing their interactions with moral authority, and referring to relevant discussions within the team. For example, when multiple team members consistently believe that moral authority demonstrates high principle and fairness when handling moral issues, this consensus strengthens other members' recognition of their moral abilities. Conversely, if team members generally raise doubts, negative feedback will also prompt others to re-examine their original positive views. Others' evaluation not only enriches team members' understanding of moral authority but also reflects the dynamic process of mutual influence and jointly shaping evaluations among team members. Therefore, this article proposes:

Proposition 3: Moral authorities can influence team members through the social judgment process.

Social identity theory states that people divide themselves into subgroups based on common characteristics and define themselves by subgroup identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This study believes that individual moral authority imposes two types of identification on team members—*affective identification* and *role identification*. The former refers to team members developing attachment and support for moral authority and its values based on emotional connections; the latter refers to the process by which team members define their own social roles

and behaviors by sharing values and behavioral norms with moral authority (Aquino & Reed II, 2002).

Moral authority can promote identification through multiple pathways: Leading moral values. When moral authority clearly transmits and practices a series of moral values, team members will gradually internalize these values as part of their own identity (Schwartz, 2005). Demonstrating ethical behavior. Moral authority not only transmits moral values through words but also guides team members through behavioral demonstration. For example, when facing temptations of interest, moral authority always follows moral standards and demonstrates noble behavior. This demonstration effect makes team members view them as role models and internalize these behaviors as their own behavioral patterns. Encouragement and feedback. Moral authority acts as a moral supporter and motivator in the team. When team members perform outstandingly in moral behavior, moral authority provides positive feedback, helping them feel their importance and value in the team. This positive feedback prompts team members to more identify with the standards advocated by moral authority and practice these standards in action, thereby internalizing morality as part of personal identity. Caring for and supporting team members' well-being. Moral authority gradually establishes deep emotional connections by demonstrating care and support for team members (Schaumberg & Wiltermuth, 2014). For example, when team members face work pressure or personal difficulties, moral authority can actively listen, express empathy, and provide practical help, enhancing their trust and dependence. Stimulating intrinsic motivation. Moral authority prompts team members to emotionally identify with moral authority by stimulating their internal pursuit of moral behavior rather than relying solely on external constraints or rewards (Brink, 1997; Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Simultaneously, they will view moral behavior as part of their own identity, thus forming role identification. Participating in moral decision-making. When moral authorities conduct moral decision-making, they achieve multi-party interaction and collaboration by inviting team members to jointly participate in discussions and decisions (Kouchaki & Smith, 2024). When team members are invited to participate in moral decision-making, they feel that their opinions and positions are fully respected and valued. This experience of being respected enhances their affective identification with moral authority. Meanwhile, by personally participating in the decision-making process and seeing their views adopted and integrated into the final decision, team members will closely link the moral standards and values reflected in the decision with their own cognition and behavior. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 4: Moral authorities can influence team members through the social identity process.

Moral authority can also exert influence on team members through informational influence and normative influence. The former refers to individuals relying on others' information or behavior as a reference in uncertain or complex situations, thereby changing their own attitudes or behaviors (O' Reilly & Cald-

well, 1979; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). The latter refers to individuals choosing attitudes or behaviors consistent with others to gain recognition, avoid exclusion, or punishment. Informational influence includes: Providing moral knowledge and guidance. Moral authority possesses rich moral knowledge, experience, and judgment, providing rational and well-considered opinions and suggestions for team members, thereby exerting informational influence. When team members face complex or uncertain moral problems, they turn to moral authority and make decisions based on the information provided. Setting examples of moral decision-making. Moral authority provides referable demonstrations for team members by showing the process and results of moral decision-making in actual situations, thereby exerting informational influence. When moral authority faces moral dilemmas, they can clearly demonstrate the logic, basis, and underlying moral principles of their decisions. Team members can directly apply these demonstrations in subsequent decision-making and behavior through observation and learning. Normative influence includes: Group pressure. On the basis of team members forming affective identification and role identification with moral authority, they jointly construct a group with shared values and behavioral norms with moral authority and its followers. This group identity enables members to clearly perceive the group's expectations for moral behavior. To maintain close connections with the group and gain its recognition, members tend to actively follow these expectations. If members fail to follow these expectations, they may face negative evaluations from inside and outside the group or lose group identification, affecting their status and sense of belonging in the group. Flexible rewards and punishments. Rewards and punishments are implicit mechanisms established by moral authority to regulate team members' behavior. With their noble moral qualities and exemplary behavior, moral authority wins the trust and obedience of team members, thus forming an implicit reward and punishment system in the team. When team members' behaviors meet the expectations of moral authority, they receive positive feedback from the group; when their behaviors violate moral standards, they may encounter negative feedback from the group (Mulder, 2008). As described above, through the progressive effects of the three stages of "social judgment-social identity-social influence," individual moral authority gradually expands its influence from the individual level to the team level, ultimately establishing broad moral prestige in the team. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 5: Moral authorities can influence team members through the social influence process.

Integrating Propositions 3, 4, and 5, we further propose:

Proposition 6: The influence of moral authority on team members can be divided into a three-stage progressive effect: social judgment, social identity, and social influence.

Proposition 7: Moral authority exerts influence on team members through three stages, thereby demonstrating its broad moral influence at the team level and achieving the norming of moral authority at the team level.

In teams without power hierarchies, member interactions follow four relationship models, including: communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing. The communal sharing relationship emphasizes consensus, solidarity, and compliance among group members. Members “view each other as completely identical, focusing on commonalities and ignoring differences.” Members are expected to jointly help the group complete tasks, emphasizing the core role of group consensus and collective participation in team interactions. The authority ranking relationship is based on the hierarchical ranking of group members. Its core logic is that members are implicitly ranked according to individual attribute differences regarded as “status symbols” (Fiske & Haslam, 1996). Ranking determines members’ role allocation in the group. This model emphasizes the importance of hierarchical structure and authority obedience in team interactions. The equality matching relationship is based on turn-taking, balance, and reciprocity. Its core logic is that group members are regarded as different but equal collaborators in activities. The market pricing relationship model is based on rational economic calculation. Its core logic is that members only participate when compensation is higher than cost when providing goods or services, emphasizing the core role of rational calculation and market mechanisms in team interactions.

Specifically, this article believes the ranking of the influence degree of the four relationship models on moral authority team norming is: authority ranking model > communal sharing model > equality matching model > market pricing model. The communal sharing model emphasizes group consensus and collective participation. Members view each other as identical and focus on common points. Individual moral authority can quickly gain member identification by demonstrating consistency with group values and diffuse its influence to the entire team in collective interactions. The authority ranking model is based on a clear hierarchical structure. Members are implicitly ranked according to status, with the highest-ranking members naturally assuming leadership responsibilities. This structure enables individual moral authority to quickly gain recognition and expand its influence to the entire team through top-down directives, thereby accelerating the realization of moral authority norming at the team level. The equality matching model emphasizes that team members are regarded as different but equal collaborators based on turn-taking and reciprocity principles, with leadership roles rotating among members. To maintain their own authority status, other leaders may intervene in or even actively suppress the influence of individual moral authority. This competitive dynamic mechanism causes individual moral authority to need to overcome resistance from other leaders to gradually gain member recognition, thereby delaying the process of moral authority team norming. The market pricing model is based on rational economic calculation, guided by “cost-benefit” and adhering to the principle of “economic interests first.” In this mechanism, the influence of individual moral authority is built on rational evaluation of costs and returns rather than moral identification, thus the team norming speed of moral authority is the slowest. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 8: The process of moral authority achieving norming at the team level is influenced by the type of team relationship model.

3.3 Research on the Cross-Level Effects of Moral Authority Team Norming

To answer questions such as “What effects does moral authority team norming have on individuals, teams, and organizations? What are its mechanisms of action? What are the boundary conditions?”, this article designs and tests the following model: In the downward direction, it constructs the theoretical path of “moral authority team norming → individual moral dilemma → individual well-being”; In the parallel direction, it constructs the theoretical path of “moral authority team norming → team flow → team performance peak”; In the upward direction, it constructs the theoretical path of “moral authority team norming → organizational network structure → organizational ethical change.” The theoretical model of Study 3 is shown in Figure 4 [FIGURE:4].

3.3.1 Downward Influence of Moral Authority Team Norming

Figure 4 shows the theoretical model of Study 3. Moral authority team norming can reduce the frequency of members encountering moral dilemmas in organizations. First, moral authority clarifies team ethical norms and behavioral demonstrations, prompting team members to jointly comply with ethical principles. When team members generally comply with ethics, individuals’ opportunities to fall into moral dilemmas are significantly reduced. Second, under the effect of moral authority, team members concretize abstract ethical principles into typical behavioral norms. This facilitates members to quickly invoke these internalized norms to judge whether their behavior conforms to the team’s core values, thereby avoiding dilemmas caused by vague values. Third, moral authority warns of ethical traps through risk prediction, avoiding individuals from falling into moral dilemmas later. Through case learning, scenario simulation, norm reminders, and early warning mechanisms, moral authority helps team members identify potential ethical risks in the early stages of decision-making.

Moral norming can reduce the degree to which members fall into moral dilemmas in organizations. First, moral norming can resolve value conflicts through a priority ranking framework. When individuals face moral dilemmas in organizations, they often fall into conflicts between different values (such as “others’ interests vs. personal integrity”). After moral norming, the team’s value ranking is clear, providing members with a clear decision-making framework, thereby reducing cognitive load and psychological pressure caused by vague values. Second, teams with moral norming can provide comprehensive ethical support and guidance for members. Based on the team’s ethical norms and experience, moral authority provides members with practical and feasible solution strategies, helping them find clear action directions in complex situations. Third, teams with moral norming will establish collective decision-making and responsibility mech-

anisms to disperse the pressure borne by individuals. When members fall into moral dilemmas, the team can jointly discuss and analyze problems, pool ideas, and seek optimal solutions, thereby improving the quality and rationality of decision-making. After moral norming, members' behavior is no longer just the result of personal choice but represents the team's moral standards, thus dispersing the pressure members bear in moral dilemmas.

Furthermore, the fewer times members encounter moral dilemmas and the lower the degree, the higher their subjective well-being. Conservation of resources theory states that individuals' resources (including emotions, cognition, time, etc.) are limited. They strive to maintain, protect, and acquire these resources to cope with stress and challenges. First, moral dilemmas consume resources. Dealing with moral dilemmas requires members to invest a large amount of cognitive resources (such as analysis and judgment) and emotional resources (such as anxiety and guilt). When members fall into moral dilemmas less frequently, they don't need to frequently mobilize limited resources to cope. The time and energy saved can be invested in other areas that can enhance well-being (such as leisure, social interaction, and growth). Second, mild moral dilemmas consume fewer resources. When facing severe moral dilemmas, members fall into deep moral struggle and psychological conflict, consuming a large amount of resources. Mild moral dilemmas usually involve relatively simple moral choices, causing less psychological pressure and burden, and correspondingly less resource consumption. Finally, slight moral dilemmas can actually help promote the accumulation of members' resources. When members can easily cope with moral dilemmas, they become more convinced of their ability to handle moral problems, thereby enhancing self-efficacy. Such positive psychological experiences not only help accumulate more psychological resources but also further enhance individual well-being. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 9: Moral authority team norming enhances members' well-being by reducing the frequency and severity of their moral dilemmas.

Individual multiple professional roles refer to the collection of different professional identities, responsibilities, and expectations that individuals simultaneously undertake in social or professional environments. Each role corresponds to unique behavioral norms, skill requirements, and responsibilities. Individuals need to switch and balance between different roles. In teams without hierarchical authority, the phenomenon of team members undertaking multiple professional roles is relatively common. We believe that multiple professional roles will weaken the positive effect of moral norming (reducing/alleviating moral dilemmas), thereby indirectly affecting individual well-being. First, multiple professional roles mean that team members need to simultaneously undertake and meet different or even conflicting responsibilities and expectations. Role conflicts can cause employees to fall into ambiguity in moral judgment, making it difficult to clearly identify and follow moral authority. Second, multiple professional roles occupy a large amount of individuals' time and energy, making it difficult for them to focus on the moral requirements of a specific role. Finally,

multiple professional roles easily lead to cognitive dissonance, causing members to doubt or alienate moral authority, thereby weakening the positive influence of moral authority. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 10: Individuals' multiple professional roles play a moderating role in the path of "moral authority team norming \rightarrow moral dilemma \rightarrow individual well-being."

3.3.2 Horizontal Influence of Moral Authority Team Norming

Team flow is the collective form of optimal experience state, which occurs when team members are completely focused and immersed in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Duncan & West, 2018; van den Hout et al., 2018). Existing evidence shows that team flow can promote team performance and team innovation (Cseh et al., 2015; Sosik et al., 1999). In addition, team flow can stimulate members' positive emotions and promote team harmony.

Moral authority team norming will prompt the team to enter a flow state. First, after moral norming, moral authority influences team flow through demonstration effects. Moral authority diffuses ethical values such as integrity and responsibility to the team level through daily behavioral demonstration, forming a shared cognitive foundation. In addition, moral authority's passion and sense of mission for work are transmitted through emotional contagion mechanisms, which can stimulate team members' intrinsic motivation, thus laying an emotional foundation for the emergence of team flow. Second, after moral norming, the reconstruction of team networks will promote flow generation. In teams with moral norming, moral authority becomes the hub of team information exchange, facilitating the dissemination and integration of ethical cognition. For example, moral authority strengthens team cohesion through informal interactions, activates weak connections, and makes information flow more efficient. Third, after moral norming, moral influence promotes team members' deep immersion by optimizing task design and execution environments. Specifically, in teams with moral norming, team ethical cognition and behavioral norms are shared, which helps identify and eliminate interference factors in task execution, thereby creating a focused work atmosphere. At the same time, moral norming stimulates team members' sense of engagement and achievement by setting goals that are both challenging and achievable. This task immersion state is the core characteristic of team flow.

Furthermore, team flow can promote collaborative quality to reach its peak. Although team flow is considered a high-experience state associated with high performance (Jackson et al., 2001; Swann et al., 2017), it cannot guarantee that the team's objective quality will improve every time it enters flow. The reasons are: on the one hand, members under team flow temporarily stop evaluating contributions and instead focus all their attention on task execution itself and other team members' actions; on the other hand, constructing high-quality output requires members to continuously evaluate and compare. Therefore, to

achieve high-quality team output, the team needs to enter the team flow state multiple times and frequently. Teams with moral norming can maintain the flow state for a long time through continuous deep collaboration and knowledge integration, continuously optimizing products, and finally achieving high-quality innovative results. The cumulative effect promoted by moral norming is the core mechanism by which team flow enhances collaborative quality. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 11: Moral authority team norming enables team performance to reach its peak through team flow.

3.3.3 Upward Influence of Moral Authority Team Norming

First, moral norming will prompt the organization to form a network structure centered on moral authority. Moral norming reflects the collective's consistent identification with moral authority, providing team members with a clear moral benchmark. In daily work, team members consciously take moral authority as a role model and demonstrate ethical behavior. As the scope of emulation expands, the influence of moral authority will rise to the organizational level and be promoted, deepened, and consolidated. This moral influence will eventually prompt all organizational members to generally establish connections with moral authority, forming a network structure centered on moral authority.

Second, moral norming has a significant impact on the predictability of node behavior in organizational networks. After moral norming, the demonstration effect of moral authority promotes the establishment of unified ethical behavioral standards within the organization, making member behavior tend to be consistent, thereby improving the predictability of node behavior. At the same time, moral norming reduces the uncertainty of node behavior by strengthening shared values and providing a stable decision-making framework for organizational members. In addition, moral norming can promote the establishment of internal ethical review mechanisms, thereby effectively filtering interference from external factors and ensuring the stability of organizational behavior. Third, moral norming can enhance the clustering of organizational networks. First, moral norming attracts members with high professional competence to form moral clusters through the professional influence of moral authority. Second, moral norming can promote the establishment of cross-functional ethical consensus, facilitating members with different professional backgrounds to form integrated clusters. Third, moral norming can strengthen the cohesion within the organization by reinforcing moral consensus, enabling the organizational network to form multiple tightly connected moral clusters. Finally, moral norming has a positive impact on the connection strength of organizational networks. At the organizational level, connection strength usually means higher trust, more frequent interaction, and deeper emotional connections. Moral norming not only enhances trust and connections among team members but also strengthens the entire organization's network connections by optimizing interactions between teams and departments.

This article proposes that moral norming can effectively promote organizational ethical innovation by changing organizational network structure. First, when moral authority becomes the core node of the network, its behavioral demonstration quickly radiates to the entire network through high-frequency interaction. Core nodes are in central positions in the network and can establish close connections with other nodes through frequent interaction. This high-frequency interaction enables the core node's values, moral standards, and behavioral paradigms to spread rapidly throughout the organization. This top-down moral dissemination provides necessary conditions for organizational ethical innovation. Second, strong predictability of node behavior in organizational networks means that organizational members are less influenced by the external world, and the organization presents a relatively closed state, highlighting the influence of moral authority. When node behavior predictability in organizational networks is high, it indicates that the organization's internal norms and values are relatively stable, and members' behavioral patterns are consistent. The organization has a low degree of openness to the external world and strong closure. In a closed organizational environment, internal moral authority can play a more effective role, providing a stable foundation for organizational ethical innovation. Third, when organizational network clustering is strong, it accelerates the circulation of information and viewpoints, speeding up the pace of organizational ethical change. In strongly clustered networks, the rapid information circulation and viewpoint dissemination mechanisms enable moral authority's viewpoints and values to spread efficiently and form broad consensus within the organization, greatly accelerating the speed of organizational ethical change and enabling new moral systems to replace unsuitable old systems more quickly. Fourth, strong connection strength in organizational network structure means strong cohesion among organizational members and more consistent actions. When connection strength in organizational networks is high, the trust and cooperation willingness among members significantly increase, thereby enhancing the organization's overall cohesion and enabling the organization to more efficiently reach consensus and take consistent action. This strongly connected network structure provides strong support for moral authority's viewpoints and actions, enabling them to quickly gain recognition and promotion from widely members in the organization, thus laying a solid mass foundation for ethical change. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 12: Moral authority team norming promotes the transformation of organizational ethical systems by adjusting organizational network structure.

In flat, networked organizational environments, the importance of team boundary-spanning behavior is increasingly prominent. Team boundary-spanning behavior is defined as behavior where team members establish relationships and interactions with external actors to achieve team goals, including information gathering and external representation functions. The information gathering function is reflected in team members obtaining, interpreting, and conveying key information through interactions with external contacts (Hansen, 1999). This behavior enables teams to timely capture

changes in the external environment, thereby enhancing team adaptability. The external representation function emphasizes team members' communication with external stakeholders, including setting goal expectations, framing resource requests, and updating project progress, helping teams gain legitimacy (such as winning support from management or clients), effectively alleviating external pressure, and creating a favorable operating environment for the team.

Under the needs of multi-team systems (Marks et al., 2005) and continuous innovation (Hargadon, 1998), teams are assigned more complex cross-functional tasks. To address these challenges, teams must directly interact with important stakeholders inside and outside the organization (Ancona et al., 2002) to ensure successful task completion in complex environments. We believe that team boundary-spanning behavior plays a positive moderating role between moral norming and organizational network structure. The reasons are threefold: First, boundary-spanning behavior enables teams to establish connections with more external entities, thereby expanding the influence of teams with moral norming in organizational networks. A team that has achieved moral norming can more quickly penetrate its influence into a broader network through boundary-spanning behavior. Second, boundary-spanning behavior helps teams obtain more external resources and information, thereby enhancing their competitiveness and strength. Teams with high moral norming can more effectively promote cooperation and coordination in organizational networks after obtaining resources through boundary-spanning behavior, enhancing their discourse power in the organization. Third, boundary-spanning behavior provides teams with opportunities to demonstrate their moral behavior and values. In cross-team cooperation, teams with high moral norming are more likely to win trust, thereby more quickly building a team-centered network structure and strengthening connections with other teams. In summary, team boundary-spanning behavior establishes its important role in organizational networks by expanding the boundaries and speed of moral authority' s influence. Accordingly, this article proposes:

Proposition 13: Team boundary-spanning behavior moderates the path of “moral authority team norming \rightarrow organizational network structure \rightarrow organizational ethical change.”

This article innovatively proposes the concept of “moral authority,” deduces research propositions and conceives research frameworks around key issues such as its formation and mechanism of action, cross-level evolution, team norming, and effects. The basic attributes of morality (such as internality and voluntariness) determine that it is difficult for organizations to “strictly control” it through commands and regulations. Or rather, strict institutional constraints and behavioral supervision can only regulate the lower limit of employees' moral behavior, difficult to touch internal moral cognition and pursuit, and may even counterproductively arouse rebellious mentality, weakening employees' intrinsic moral motivation. Moral authority gets rid of excessive dependence on formal power and instead relies on the informal influence of moral models and employ-

ees' spontaneous followership of moral role models. This not only conforms to the trend of organizational change but also responds to the pursuit of new-generation employees. Specifically:

First, this article draws on multidisciplinary ideas, follows standardized empirical research paradigms, and develops the concepts of “moral authority” and its derivative concept—“moral authority team norming.” By clearly defining the connotation, extension, structure, and dimensional content of the two concepts, it scientifically constructs corresponding conceptual models and structural frameworks: The former constructs moral authority as a three-dimensional conceptual model composed of general morality, professional morality, and authoritative morality, and uses three vector indicators of “thickness-precision-height” for concrete description; The latter constructs moral authority team norming as a two-dimensional conceptual model composed of cognitive followership and behavioral followership, depicting employees' internalization and manifestation of moral authority influence from both internal cognition and external behavior levels. The construction and clarification of the above concepts, on the one hand, enhance the scientificity of existing moral authority research, correct the limitations of previous research that has long remained at the level of phenomenon description without in-depth speculative analysis and systematic empirical paradigms, and lay a theoretical foundation for subsequent scale development, model testing, and mechanism analysis. On the other hand, they fill the obvious gap in organizational moral research from the employee perspective, face up to the broad influence of moral authority, and inspire subsequent research to “think from others' perspectives”—re-examining organizational moral phenomena from the employee-centric perspective. It can be seen that the new concepts and changed perspectives proposed in this article provide a theoretically promising new direction for organizational moral innovation.

Second, this article constructs a dynamic, multi-level theoretical framework covering “formation mechanism-influence process-cross-level norming” by analyzing the entire process of moral authority formation and evolution, thereby compensating for the deficiency that the sources of authority are relatively single and effect explanations are relatively one-sided under the traditional formal power perspective. Existing organizational authority theories mostly take formal hierarchical structure and authority configuration as basic premises, limiting the sources of authority to formal power categories such as positional power and expert power, resulting in relatively single influence directions (top-down) and relatively one-sided mechanisms (relying on institutional authorization and control of formal power). To break through the above limitations, on the one hand, this article proposes the promoting effects of key traits/abilities such as moral awareness, moral priority, moral complexity, and moral courage on moral authority formation from both individual internal moral endowment and external moral behavior aspects, emphasizing the diversification of moral authority' s source types and the pluralization of its generation mechanisms. On the other hand, this article reveals in detail the three-stage mechanism—social judgment, identification, and influence process—through which moral authority plays a role

in team members' psychology and behavior at the micro level. With the help of the concept of "moral authority team norming," it systematically reveals how moral authority leaps to the team level through diffusion and norming processes and how it radiates to higher levels and more diverse subjects through team norming paths, enabling us to have a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of moral authority' s internal and external sources, formation process, effect mechanisms, and cross-level evolution.

Third, this article takes the derivative concept of "moral authority team norming" as a key fulcrum to construct a systematic effect framework of moral authority that runs through micro (individual psychology), meso (team behavior), and macro (organizational system) levels. It thereby explains how team-level moral norming influences multi-level subjects (employees, teams, organizations) and further improves and consolidates the logical bridge for moral authority' s cross-level influence on diverse subjects in organizational contexts. Specifically, at the individual level (downward influence), based on moral cognition theory, this article explores how moral authority team norming enhances individual well-being by alleviating team members' moral dilemmas and reducing value conflicts and internal friction. At the team level (parallel influence), based on social identity theory, this article reveals how moral authority team norming promotes team performance by strengthening shared identity and collaborative consistency, stimulating team flow. At the organizational level (upward influence), based on social network theory, this article analyzes how moral authority team norming promotes organizational ethical norms and governance transformation by reshaping internal relationship structures and interaction patterns and adjusting the distribution of node influence. Through the above conception, this article integrates the team-level norming effects with the individual-level moral shaping process, using the two core concepts of "moral authority" and "moral authority team norming" as theoretical fulcrums to break through the hierarchical barriers and unidirectional logic of traditional authority influence, vertically depicting the path and mechanism of moral authority generated from individuals, diffused through team norming, and exerting differential influences on multi-level subjects of employees-teams-organizations, thereby more clearly demonstrating the comprehensive influence and "spark prairie fire" ripple effect of moral authority in organizational ethical governance.

In summary, moral authority theory is based on the employee-centric perspective, focusing on the diverse moral phenomena that emerge from ordinary employees in their daily work and interaction processes, and refining scientific questions and exploring internal laws based on this. In essence, moral authority theory and ethical leadership theory are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, both revolve around explaining and predicting ethical issues and moral laws in organizations, only adopting different observation perspectives. As an important existing theory, ethical leadership research provides rich theoretical insights and literature evidence for the proposal and development of moral authority. On the other hand, as an emerging theory, the perspective shift of moral authority is a beneficial supplement and perspective

extension to ethical leadership theory. The two complement each other, making the organizational ethics theoretical system more comprehensive and complete, and the organizational ethics knowledge structure more balanced and comprehensive. Specifically, ethical leadership theory emphasizes that leaders regulate and guide subordinates' thoughts and behaviors through high moral standards and behavioral exemplification. Its applicability and effectiveness have been repeatedly verified by a large amount of literature, and the theoretical space is becoming saturated. In contrast, moral authority shifts the research focus "downward" to moral authorities among ordinary employees, elevating them from the "object" position of being managed to the "subject" position of spreading/leading morality. This positioning change expands organizational ethics research from a "single-engine" model dominated by ethical leadership to a "dual-engine" co-driven model of "ethical leadership + moral authority," taking into account both formal and informal power, traditional structures and innovative changes, and integrating moral influence in multiple directions of "downward + horizontal + upward + cross-boundary," promoting organizational moral theory to develop in a more compatible, comprehensive, and three-dimensionally balanced direction.

At the practical level, the proposal of moral authority theory responds to the main theme of promoting moral role models in the whole society, providing a practical handle for enterprises to promote spiritual civilization construction and ethical governance, elevating previous moral promotion activities such as "Learn from Lei Feng" and "Learn from Guo Mingyi" to the height of "scientific moral management." The research results of the conceived contents such as "concept and measurement of moral authority," "formation, influence effect, and cross-level evolution of moral authority," and "cross-level effects of moral authority team norming" are expected to directly serve enterprise practice in multiple management fields. For example, in human resource management, they can be used to incorporate traits, behaviors, and element indicators related to moral authority in employee selection, quality assessment, and cadre selection, achieving the identification and key cultivation of potential moral authorities. In corporate culture construction, they can help organizations systematically discover, select, and shape moral role models, forming a sustainable role model cultivation echelon and moral dissemination mechanism. In team building, they can guide the team norming of moral authority, leading moral authority to leap to "moral teams" at the group level, thereby enhancing trust, cooperation, and harmony within the team. In moral governance, they can consciously utilize the moral wisdom, value judgment, and persuasion of moral authority in daily management and major decision-making processes, supplementing the governance model of institutional constraints with flexible, endogenous moral influence. In summary, moral authority theory is expected to provide systematic intellectual support and theoretical guidance for enterprises to build scientific, efficient, and more easily recognized and accepted ethical management models.

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