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Babu, N, Fletcher, L, Pichler, S and Budhwar, P (2024) What's trust got to do with it? Examining trust in leadership, psychological capital, and employee well-being in a cross-national context during Covid-19. European Management Review, 21 (1). pp. 31-44. ISSN 1740-4754

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12561

Publisher: Wiley

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an open access article which first appeared in European Management Review

Data Access Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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DOI: 10.1111/emre.12561

RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMR European Management Review
The Journal of The European Academy of Management

What's trust got to do with it? Examining trust in leadership, psychological capital, and employee well-being in a cross-national context during Covid-19

Nishat Babu[1] | Luke Fletcher[2] | Shaun Pichler[3] | Pawan Budhwar[4]

[1]Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK
[2]University of Bath, Bath, UK
[3]California State University, Fullerton, California, USA
[4]Aston University, Birmingham, UK

Correspondence
Nishat Babu, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK.
Email: n.babu@lboro.ac.uk

Funding information
Aston University

Abstract
We propose and test the idea that trust in the senior leadership team is needed to help overcome the potential widespread decrements to employee well-being resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we suggest that psychological capital mediates the relationship between trust in the senior leadership team's response to Covid-19 and employee well-being. We also examine the contextual relevance of line management's servant leadership alongside country differences (i.e., India vs. UK) in reinforcing the importance of trust in fostering psychological capital. We test our model in a time-lagged survey study that follows employed individuals towards the early, middle, and later stages of the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. Results provide support for our model and indicate potential country differences. Our findings point to the significance of leadership, both at the senior level and at the line management level, in protecting employee well-being during crises.

KEYWORDS
Covid-19, employee well-being, psychological capital, senior leadership, servant leadership, trust

INTRODUCTION

Employees across the globe are suffering from greater mental distress in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Sibley et al., 2020). In such circumstances, employees are turning to their senior leaders for support and guidance (Rudolph et al., 2020), although at the same time reports suggest that they are "losing faith" in them (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). This is significant given that trust in leadership "may be particularly important in times of challenge and adversity" (Dirks, 2006, p. 20), and uncertainty (Norman et al., 2010), and can be a key factor in maintaining employee well-being (Inceoglu et al., 2018). Because pandemics similar to Covid-19 are predicted to occur more often in the future (Tollefson, 2020), understanding how to maintain employee well-being during similar health pandemics (and other crisis situations, e.g., natural disasters), which likewise entail uncertainty, ambiguity, and change in work, is imperative. Given the aforementioned significance of trust in leadership for maintaining employee well-being during crisis situations in general, and the Covid-19 pandemic specifically, we sought to understand the mechanisms through, and conditions under which, trust in leadership can help preserve employee well-being.

We focus on trust in the senior leadership team's (SLT's) response to the pandemic, as they would have been responsible for spearheading the strategic direction of the organization when the threat of Covid-19 arose. The reactions and behaviors of SLTs are critical in times of crisis because they need to respond effectively to the heightened demands and expectations of external and internal stakeholders, significantly its own employees (Heifetz et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2021). Employees had to quickly adapt to new working and living conditions in light of tightening restrictions, and their ability to perform and be committed to the organization was potentially under threat during this time of uncertainty and change (Rudolph et al., 2020).

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Importantly, in such times of crisis, employees often turn to organizational leaders for information and reassurance (Sanders et al., 2020). Indeed, trust in leaders and the role of the line manager have been highlighted as key predictors of worker outcomes (Lauring & Kubovcikova, 2022). Jordi (2010) argues that the senior leadership role should be conceptualized as helping individuals grow by creating an environment where human aspirations can be developed and fostering a climate of trust. There is some debate as to how effective trust in senior leadership is in terms of workers' psychological outcomes, given the generally loose ties between employees and senior leaders (e.g., Dirks & Skarlicki, 2004). Because line managers tend to be more proximally and psychologically close to employees (Gilbert et al., 2011), their leadership in particular may operate as a boundary condition here, enhancing the effects of trust in senior leaders on employee outcomes (Kauppila et al., 2021). This is important because employee perceptions of line managers and senior leaders are related to one another but are often not studied together (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017).

Using conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2002, 2011), which outlines that individuals strive to protect and enhance their finite resources, we suggest that in the wake of a crisis, employees seek to protect themselves from resource loss, which otherwise is the strongest predictor of psychological distress during unusual circumstances (Holmgreen et al., 2017). Employee trust in their SLT means they do not have to expend resources in scrutinizing what their SLT is doing and the implications this may have for them (Mayer & Gavin, 2005), enabling them to protect themselves from resource loss and having sufficient resources at their disposal to invest in gaining additional resources (Hobfoll, 2011). This additional resource gain may arguably be in the form of psychological capital (PsyCap), which provides employees with critical personal resources such as self-efficacy and resilience, helping them to cope with their pandemic-induced work circumstances, and protecting their well-being.

In addition, we focus on the moderating role of line management's servant leadership—a follower-centric and other-oriented leadership approach that places focus on employee needs and interests, and which is incrementally more influential than other dominant leadership styles (for a meta-analysis, see Lee et al., 2020). In line with COR theory, we argue the line manager's servant leadership is an important contextual factor that provides conducive conditions to facilitate resource protection and enrichment, reinforcing the positive effects of trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic on employee PsyCap. Nevertheless, we consider the role of different national contexts (UK and India) by drawing on culturally endorsed implicit leadership theory, which suggests that different leadership styles are accepted and therefore effective in different cultures (Brodbeck et al., 2004). We propose that because line management's servant leadership is better aligned with leadership prototypes in the UK (i.e., more accepted) versus India—given that servant leadership has been developed in the West and thus under Western notions of effective leadership (Eva et al., 2019; Greenleaf, 1977)—it will be more effective in strengthening the positive effects of trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic on employee PsyCap, in the UK.

Our study seeks to address two specific research questions: One, how does trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic protect employee well-being, through its effects on PsyCap?; and two, what role does line management's servant leadership play in moderating the effects of trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic on PsyCap, across the UK and India? Our study makes three key contributions. First, we add to prior research on trust in leadership by focusing especially on higher levels of organizational leadership (cf. Crossley et al., 2013), as it is the SLT that would have been tasked with leading the organization through the pandemic, having a direct impact on employees' work (and even home) situation. And so, although there have been anecdotal suggestions that trust in leadership is crucial for navigating the pandemic effectively, our study provides empirical confirmation that indeed it can be key in protecting employee well-being, which otherwise has been severely affected during the pandemic (Ahern & Loh, 2020). We thus broaden the referents of trust studied and extend work on the boundary conditions of trust through our investigation of line management's servant leadership (Dirks & De Jong, 2022). Second, we contribute to the advancement of COR theory by applying its principles of resource caravans and caravan passageways (Hobfoll, 2011), which tend to receive scant attention in leadership studies (cf. Booth-LeDoux et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2018). By doing so, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of how and when trust in the SLT serves to protect employee well-being through resource protection and enrichment (vis-à-vis PsyCap—a resource caravan), which is reinforced under the caravan passageway of line management's servant leadership. Finally, we specifically add to the servant leadership literature, by addressing the calls from Eva et al. (2019) to apply alternative theories (i.e., COR theory) as opposed to the dominant social-learning, -exchange, and -identity perspectives; and to assess the relevance of servant leadership across national cultures.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

We examined our hypothesized model (see Figure 1 for an illustration) across three important time periods during the pandemic's first wave (2020). Context is often a neglected feature within broader management and

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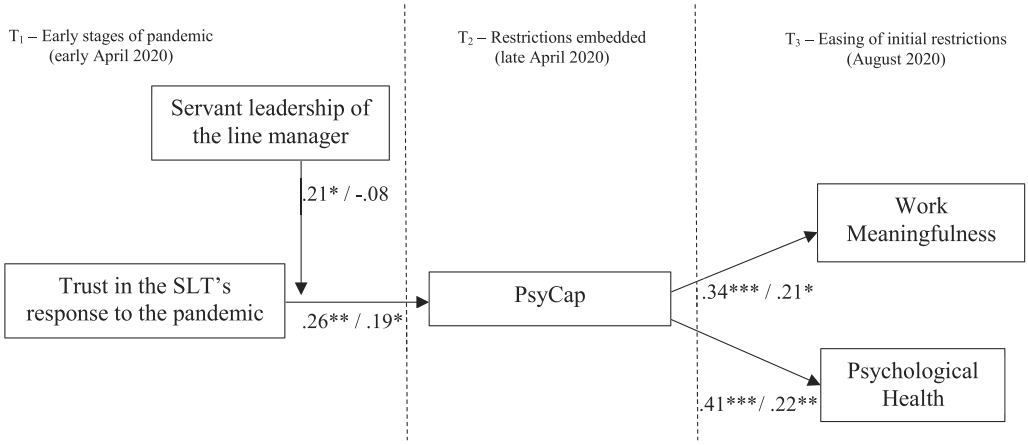

FIGURE 1 Path analysis results of the hypothesized model. Control variables are not included for ease of interpretation. Standardized betas are reported for the UK before "/" and for India after "/." UK $N = 210$, India $N = 205$. PsyCap, psychological capital; SLT, senior leadership team. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

organizational behavior research—yet it is highly significant because it can alter the occurrence and meaning of, as well as functional relationships between, organizational phenomena (Johns, 2001, 2006). Focusing on the pandemic as a unique context is pertinent because the unfolding of the pandemic acts as an "extreme" case that can provide an opportunity to verify existing theoretical concepts and relationships, such as those between PsyCap and well-being, within a particularly sensitive period. Additionally, it allows us to explore specific aspects related to the context itself, such as trust in the SLT's response to Covid-19 and how that may influence PsyCap and, ultimately, employee well-being.

We underpin our hypothesized model with COR theory (Hobfoll, 2002, 2011), which sets out to explain human behavior on the basis of an evolutionary need to gain and protect resources. As per COR theory, individuals have a finite amount of resources that they seek to protect against resource loss and invest to gain additional resources, so that they are able to preserve what is centrally valued, such as well-being (Hobfoll, 2011). Hobfoll (2011) suggests that such resources do not travel individually, but rather travel in packs (or "resource caravans"), and are supported by "resource caravan passageways," which "… support, foster, enrich, and protect the resources of individuals …" (p. 118). Accordingly, we propose a model whereby trust in SLT, by way of reassuring employees about the decisions/actions of the organization in response to the pandemic, protects employee resources and facilitates resource gain in the form of PsyCap (a resource caravan). We argue that this relationship is strengthened under the resource caravan passageway of servant leadership, which provides a resource-protecting and -enriching environment. When employees acquire greater PsyCap, they can invest these resources in order to enable them to cope with their unusual work circumstances, ultimately protecting their well-being. We specifically focus on the effects of PsyCap on two important indicators of well-being: psychological health and work meaningfulness. The former captures the general mental health of an individual (Goldberg & Williams, 1988), and the latter focuses on a growth purpose-driven psychological state associated with feeling one's work has significance and value (Fletcher & Schofield, 2021; Spreitzer, 1995).

Trust in the SLT's response, PsyCap, and employee well-being

Dealing with the distractions and worries arising from a health pandemic, which pose significant changes to one's life, causes strain and distress and leads to resource loss, consequently leaving employees susceptible to poor well-being. Because SLTs had to make rapid strategic decisions to ensure their organization's survival, their response and communications early on in the pandemic should be salient to employees (Sanders et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021). We believe trust in the SLT's response within the current study is pivotal given that "… trust especially matters for situations in which one party has to be dependent on another party, but he or she lacks the abilities to control or closely monitor the other party's behaviors" (Li & Tan, 2013, p. 409). Trust in senior leadership can further act as a coping resource that helps employees to deal with adversity and heightened job demands during periods of change (Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018). Indeed, prior research has pointed to the essential role of leadership, including trust in leadership, for maintaining employee well-being (for a review, see Inceoglu et al., 2018). More recent research has commented on the importance of trust in leadership

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specifically with respect to navigating the Covid-19 pandemic, although it has not empirically examined this (Ahern & Loh, 2020).

Trust is "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). Trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic helps employees to positively interpret actions the SLT took in responding to the pandemic, as well as enabling employees to hold positive expectations of possible future action, believing it is/will be in their best interest (e.g., Crossley et al., 2013; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). This serves to reassure employees about how the organization is dealing with the pandemic, as well as increasing employee willingness to follow the guidance of their leadership (Burke et al., 2007). Trust in leadership helps employees to keep their focus on their day-to-day role activities and is considered especially important during periods of uncertainty in employees' occupational lives (Colquitt et al., 2012). Otherwise, a lack of trust in leadership can be a significant cause of uncertainty for employees (Whitener et al., 1998), causing employees to be worried and distracted about their work situation, which would then deplete their resources (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). For instance, they may expend resources to actively monitor their SLT on an ongoing basis in order to reduce the risk of potential negative outcomes to themselves (Mayer & Gavin, 2005), by engaging in self-protection (Deming, 1994), or even defensive behaviors (Ashforth & Lee, 1990). Trust thus protects employees from resource loss and signals to them the instrumentality of their resource investment (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015), such that they ultimately invest their resources in order to promote further resource gain (Hobfoll, 2011).

According to COR theory, individuals are strategic in the resources they acquire (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Because employees' well-being would have been suffering during the pandemic (Sibley et al., 2020), they would strategically choose to focus on acquiring personal resources (in the form of PsyCap), which can allow them to protect their well-being. PsyCap is characterized as "… (1) having confidence to … succeed at challenging tasks *[efficacy]*; (2) making a positive attribution about succeeding … *[optimism]*; (3) persevering toward goals … *[hope]*; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back … *[resilience]*" (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 3—emphasis in *[italics]* added). When employees trust their SLT's response to the pandemic, they will believe they can be efficacious in dealing with their new pandemic-induced work, feel optimistic about navigating the pandemic's impact successfully, remain hopeful in pursuing their revised objectives, and remain resilient in facing barriers that continue to arise as a result of the pandemic. These four resources travel in resource caravans (i.e., aggregated and mutually reinforcing resources that subsist together—Hobfoll, 2011; Peterson et al., 2011; Vilariño del Castillo & Lopez-Zafra, 2022), and have demonstrable positive associations with psychological health and well-being (Avey et al., 2010), as well as mediating the effects of leadership on employee outcomes (e.g., Bouckenooghe et al., 2015; Vilariño del Castillo & Lopez-Zafra, 2022).

> **Hypothesis 1.** PsyCap (T_2) will mediate the positive relationship between trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic (T_1) and employee well-being (T_3).

Line management's servant leadership

Servant leadership is defined as "… an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward … concern for others" (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Research has linked servant leadership with various employee outcomes, including perceptions of meaningful work (Khan et al., 2015), and psychological well-being (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), as well as indicating its importance during periods of organizational change and uncertainty (De Souza & van Dierendonck, 2014). We focus on line management's servant leadership as it is the most proximate leadership for an employee and is seen to be a representation of the organization (Liden et al., 2004). Moreover, because servant leaders provide support for employee development, they may act as an important factor in preventing work ambiguity (Bauer et al., 2019). This is especially pertinent during the Covid-19 pandemic where enforced lockdowns and workplace restrictions forced employees to adjust to their revised roles and home-work environments.

We argue that line management's servant leadership is an important contextual factor bounding the relationship between trust in the SLT and PsyCap. When assessing the SLT's response to the pandemic, employees will look to their line manager on a day-to-day basis, given that they are a more proximal form of reference and guidance for employees. Building on COR theory, we propose that servant leadership provides ideal conditions to foster and protect resources, thus amplifying the extent to which trust in the SLT can enable the effective investment of employees' resources in ways that help them to protect their well-being. This argumentation is consistent with research demonstrating that servant leadership increases perceptions of trust in leadership (Joseph & Winston, 2005) and enhances relationships between trust-related variables and psychological outcomes (e.g., Hu & Liden, 2011).

Servant leadership and country differences

Culturally endorsed implicit leadership theory (Brodbeck et al., 2004; House et al., 2002) outlines that national

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culture will shape the way a leader is perceived and responded to. That is, the more leaders are seen as prototypical, or aligned with a specific culture, the more trustworthy they seem to be (Barreto & Hogg, 2017), facilitating the extent to which they are accepted and consequently allowed to be effective. Although servant leadership is demonstrably effective, its effectiveness from a cross-cultural comparative perspective has to date received scant attention. Though Van Dierendonck et al. (2017) did provisionally evidence the cross-cultural suitability of servant leadership across Europe, there is inconclusive evidence that servant leadership may be less effective in non-Western cultures (e.g., Donia et al., 2016), warranting cross-cultural research of servant leadership beyond Western settings.

We follow previous research (e.g., Lee et al., 2020) and consider culture based on the geographical location of individuals, in this case, the UK and India. Prior research suggests a strong impact of culture on management and leadership approaches in both settings, though largely in different ways (see Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002). We draw on Hofstede's (1980) work to consider culture across the two dimensions of power distance and individualism, as these tend to be the strongest predictors of outcomes and receive the greatest attention in cross-cultural leadership investigations (Lee et al., 2020). In cultures characterized by high power-distance (like India), individuals expect and accept power inequalities and are accustomed to a hierarchical approach to leadership, whereas in low power-distance cultures (like the UK), power is distributed more equally and individuals are used to a more horizontal approach to leadership (Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002). Meanwhile, in cultures low on individualism (i.e., collectivistic), the focus is on the individual as part of the group and on the needs and preferences of the group as a whole, whereas in individualistic societies, the focus is on the individual's needs and preferences first and foremost.

Eva et al. (2019) in their review note that because servant leadership has been developed in the West, "… it is better suited to countries where the power distance between leaders and employees is low" (p. 125). Furthermore, servant leaders give greater power and credence to followers' needs and development and, thus, are more likely to be accepted and therefore effective in individualistic cultures. As per Hofstede Insights (2022), the UK is lower in power distance and higher in individualism, whereas India is characterized as being higher in power distance and lower in individualism (see also Chhokar, 2002; Zhang et al., 2021), further supporting our argument that servant leadership may be better aligned with the UK than India. Accordingly, we suggest that in the UK specifically, servant leadership is more likely to serve as a resource caravan passageway and strengthen the effects of trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic on PsyCap, because it is more likely to be accepted due to its fit with the leadership prototypes of the UK culture, rather than in India.

> **Hypothesis 2.** Servant leadership of the line manager (T_1) will strengthen the positive effects of trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic (T_1) on employees' PsyCap (T_2) in the UK, more so than in India.

METHODOLOGY

The Covid-19 context

Our study captured participants at three different time points during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. The first time point was towards the start of the restrictions in early April, when stay-at-home orders were being enforced across the world and employees were rapidly adjusting to working from home. In the UK, a nationwide lockdown was imposed on March 23, and in India on March 24. The second time point was three weeks later (end of April) by which participants had arguably become embedded into their new way of working. This is supported by prior research that has indicated that individuals adapt to life events within a relatively short time period (e.g., Diener et al., 2009) and that the first three to six weeks of a crisis are when the most significant effects occur (Beal & Ghandour, 2011). Finally, the third time point was early August when restrictions had begun to ease. The UK began to ease restrictions from early June, and at the start of August, the government introduced the "Eat Out to Help Out" scheme to encourage individuals to dine at restaurants and cafés. In India, the Ministry of Home Affairs declared a phased approach to easing from lockdown, similarly beginning from June, and by August, most restrictions had been lifted, allowing recreational activities to resume, in addition to allowing inter- and intra-state travel.

To compare the progress of the two countries across our three measurement points, the Covid-19 Stringency Index (Hale et al., 2021) developed by Oxford University is useful. This is a composite measure that tracks the response of different countries to the pandemic, based on nine response indicators that include school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans (range 0 to 100; 100 = strictest). These values indicate that both India and the UK were comparatively strict in their response across time one (April 7, 2020: India = 100, UK = 80), time two (April 27, 2020: India = 96, UK = 80), and time three (August 3, 2020: India = 86, UK = 70). It should be noted that this index bases its values on the strictest region on a subnational level, which is important to bear in mind given the size of India and the disparities in response across different regions, making the values for India quite conservative.

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Participants and procedure

Data for the UK were collected primarily through the crowdsourcing platform Prolific, and those for India were collected via a local data collection agency. The criteria for participation were that individuals be of working age (i.e., 18–66 years of age) and in part or full-time employment, located in the UK or India. In Prolific, participants selected themselves into the study by responding to the advert that was placed on the platform. In India, an established data collection agency was used, which used similar parameters and practices as Prolific. Sample sizes were boosted through additional convenience sampling for both countries, which was collected concurrently via social media (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit), selected email listservs, and personal networks of the research team; the aforementioned inclusion criteria were used here also. Participants were reimbursed monetarily in the case of Prolific and the Indian data collection agency, whereas for the convenience sample, they were entered into a prize draw for vouchers. We combined the samples but made sure to control for the sample source (e.g., convenience vs. data collected through the agency/Prolific) during analysis to prevent potential bias. After removing incomplete data and seven significant outliers, the total dataset of 415 individuals was composed of 210 respondents from the UK (146 Prolific and 64 convenience) and 205 from India (185 data collection agency and 20 convenience).

In each country, just under half of the participants had a supervisory/managerial role, under two thirds worked full-time, and over two thirds worked in large (mainly private) organizations (250+ employees). The average organizational tenure in each country was similar (5–6 years). Despite the similarities, there were some differences, namely, age, gender, and significant change in job/employment between time one (T_1) and time three (T_3). Specifically, the age of participants was slightly higher in the UK than in India ($M = 36$ vs. 32 years); the majority (72%) of the UK participants were female compared with 36% of participants in India; and the proportion who experienced a significant job/employment change between T_1 and T_3 was higher in India than in the UK (46% vs. 34%).

Measures

All measures were rated on a 7-point (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) Likert scale, unless otherwise stated.

Trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic (T_1)

A nine-item measure covering the three dimensions of perceived competence, benevolence, and integrity was adapted from Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies (2017). The reliability of the measure was acceptable within both countries: UK $\alpha = 0.98$, India $\alpha = 0.96$. The original measure focused on trust in institutional leadership within governmental institutions and so we adapted it to focus on the SLT's response to the pandemic: For example, "When it concerns the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the senior leadership team in my organization … (i) were capable (competence dimension), (ii) acted in the interest of employees (benevolence dimension), (iii) were sincere (integrity dimension)." Trust can be considered a higher order factor, hence, an aggregate score of the three dimensions was calculated.

Servant leadership of the line manager (T_1)

The seven-item (SL-7) short form of the Servant Leadership measure (SL-28) (Liden et al., 2015) assessed servant leadership behaviors, for example, "My manager/supervisor puts my best interests ahead of his/her own," and here respondents were asked to specifically rate their "direct manager or supervisor." The reliability of the measure was acceptable within both countries: UK $\alpha = 0.87$, India $\alpha = 0.84$.

PsyCap (T_2)

The Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-12) (Luthans et al., 2007) focuses on how individuals felt over the past month. The 12-item measure is designed to capture four underlying constructs that underpin PsyCap—hope (e.g., "Right now, I see myself as being pretty successful at work"), efficacy (e.g., "I feel confident contributing to discussions about my organization's strategy"), resilience (e.g., "I usually take stressful things at work in my stride"), and optimism (e.g., "I'm optimistic about what will happen to me in the future as it pertains to work"). The reliability of the measure was acceptable within both countries: UK $\alpha = 0.91$, India $\alpha = 0.72$. PsyCap is considered a higher order factor, hence, the aggregate score of the four dimensions was calculated.

Work meaningfulness (T_3)

Six items focusing on experiences over the past month and reflecting two dimensions of work meaningfulness were assessed: meaningfulness *in* work (three items—Spreitzer, 1995; e.g., "Over the past month, the work I did was very important to me") and meaningfulness *at* work (three items—Fletcher & Schofield, 2021; e.g., "Over the past month, my work was deemed valuable by the organization"). The reliability of the measure was acceptable within both countries: UK $\alpha = 0.93$, India $\alpha = 0.88$. This draws on the conceptual work by

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Pratt and Ashforth (2003) that meaningfulness within the workplace can be derived from two interconnected elements: the work itself (*in work*) and from the wider organizational environment (*at work*). As both dimensions were highly correlated (UK: $r = 0.73$, India: $r = 0.72$), the aggregate score of these two dimensions was calculated.

Psychological health (T_3)

Six items from the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) were adapted to focus on the frequency of each experience over the past month: from 1 = *never* to 7 = *always* (e.g., "I have been able to enjoy day-to-day activities"). The reliability of the measure was acceptable, albeit on the boundary for India: UK $\alpha = 0.85$, India $\alpha = 0.69$.

Control variables

We controlled for the data collection method (0 = convenience, 1 = market research agency/Prolific) to prevent bias from alternative data sources, and employment change from T_1 to T_3 (0 = no change, 1 = significant change), given that a number of employees faced changes in employment status as a result of the pandemic. We also controlled for age (years) and gender (0 = male, 1 = female), as these may be confounding variables linking trust with outcomes (e.g., Giordano & Lindström, 2011).

Analytical strategy

We first ran a configural and metric confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model of the five main study variables (trust, PsyCap, and meaningful work represented by their dimensions; servant leadership and psychological health represented by their items), which found that the configural model was a reasonable fit: $\chi^2(398) = 606.73$, $p < 0.001$; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.95, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.06. Although the metric model was a slightly better fit, $\Delta\chi^2(17) = 31.73$, $p < 0.05$, the differences in CFI ($\Delta = 0.004$) and RMSEA ($\Delta = 0.001$) were negligible; thus, the five constructs can be considered similarly distinct across the two countries. We also compared the fit of the configural model against three alternative models, all of which were a worse fit: (i) where servant leadership and trust in SLT were combined into one factor (four-factor model): $\Delta\chi^2(8) = 721.64$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2(406) = 1328.37$, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.11, CFI = 0.78, SRMR = 0.10; (ii) where trust in the SLT and PsyCap were combined into one factor (four-factor model): $\Delta\chi^2(8) = 495.76$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2(406) = 1102.49$, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.09, CFI = 0.83, SRMR = 0.10; and (iii) where work meaningfulness and psychological health were combined into one factor (four-factor model): $\Delta\chi^2(8) = 184.25$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2(406) = 790.98$, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.07. Therefore, we continued with conducting a multigroup path analysis on our hypothesized model using MPlus (v8), where the predictor and moderator were standardized, with a 5000-sample bootstrapping procedure.

The unconstrained model (where the hypothesized paths are allowed to vary between the UK and India samples) was a good fit: $\chi^2(12) = 23.15$, $p < 0.05$; RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.04. This was a better fit than the constrained model, where the hypothesized paths were not allowed to vary (but the effects of control variables were allowed to vary to focus specifically on how constraining hypothesized paths affected the model fit): $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 15.47$, $p < 0.01$; $\chi^2(17) = 38.62$, $p < 0.01$; RMSEA = 0.08, CFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.07. To further examine the fit of the unconstrained model, we added the direct relationships between trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic (the predictor) and outcomes. Although this did not result in a significant chi-square difference, it did fit the data slightly better: $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 9.02$, $p = 0.061$; $\chi^2(8) = 14.13$, $p = 0.079$; RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.03. Therefore, we present the findings with these direct relationships included (see Table 2).

Lastly, we tested alternative path analytic models: (i) where the interaction effects between servant leadership and trust in the SLT were moved to the direct (c′) path to the outcomes, rather than at the first stage (path a) of the mediation, and (ii) where PsyCap was the predictor, trust in SLT was positioned as a mediator, and the interaction between servant leadership and trust was positioned on outcomes rather than on PsyCap. Both of these were not comparable in terms of fit in relation to the revised hypothesized model noted above: (i) $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 3.37$, $p > 0.05$; $\chi^2(2) = 10.76$, $p < 0.01$; RMSEA = 0.15, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.03; and (ii) $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 182.79$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2(10) = 196.92$, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.30, CFI = 0.55, SRMR = 0.11.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and suggests that the relationships between trust in SLT and PsyCap, PsyCap and work meaningfulness, and PsyCap and psychological health are all significant and in the hypothesized direction for both countries.

Table 2 shows the results of the multigroup path analysis using 5000 bootstrapped sampling, and Figure 1 illustrates the main findings associated with the hypothesized model. First, trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic (T_1) is significantly and positively related to

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TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for the UK and India.

Variable	UK Mean (SD)	India Mean (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Data collection method	0.70 (0.46)	0.90 (0.30)		0.04	−0.03	−0.46***	−0.12	0.20**	−0.20**	0.08	−0.03
2. Employment change T_1 to T_3	0.34 (0.48)	0.47 (0.50)	0.22**		0.09	0.02	−0.27***	−0.13	−0.12	−0.10	0.04
3. Gender	0.72 (0.45)	0.36 (0.48)	0.01	0.18*		−0.17*	−0.07	−0.08	−0.11	−0.15*	−0.01
4. Age	36.45 (10.29)	31.87 (8.29)	−0.33***	−0.10	−0.16*		−0.05	−0.18**	0.08	0.05	0.07
5. Trust in the SLT's response	5.33 (1.42)	5.62 (0.87)	−0.13	−0.14*	0.02	0.05		0.38***	0.32***	0.07	0.13
6. Servant leadership	4.62 (1.21)	5.41 (0.77)	−0.02	−0.07	−0.01	−0.12	0.57***		0.29***	0.11	0.02
7. PsyCap	4.85 (0.93)	5.39 (0.48)	−0.09	−0.19**	−0.07	0.06	0.25***	0.16*		0.20**	0.23***
8. Work meaningfulness	4.92 (1.35)	5.58 (0.72)	−0.15*	−0.26***	0.01	0.02	0.27***	0.21**	0.41***		0.47***
9. Psychological health	4.88 (0.89)	5.17 (0.59)	−0.17*	−0.05	0.05	0.03	0.22***	0.20**	0.43***	0.47***	

Note: Correlations for the UK are below the diagonal, and correlations for India are above the diagonal. UK $N = 210$, India $N = 205$.
Abbreviations: PsyCap, psychological capital; SLT, senior leadership team.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

PsyCap (T_2) in both the UK and India (UK: $\beta = 0.26$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 0.07 to 0.41; India: $\beta = 0.19$, 95% CI = 0.02 to 0.35). Second, PsyCap (T_2) is significantly and positively associated with meaningfulness at work (T_3) in both countries (UK: $\beta = 0.34$, 95% CI = 0.21 to 0.47; India: $\beta = 0.21$, 95% CI = 0.02 to 0.36), as well as with psychological health (T_3) in both countries (UK: $\beta = 0.41$, 95% CI = 0.31 to 0.52; India: $\beta = 0.22$, 95% CI = 0.05 to 0.37). Third, the indirect effects linking trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic (T_1) with work meaningfulness (T_3) and psychological health (T_3) in the UK, via PsyCap (T_2), were significant (standardized $IE = 0.09$, 95% CI = 0.02 to 0.15; standardized $IE = 0.11$, 95% CI = 0.03 to 0.17, respectively). Similarly, these indirect effects were also found in India, albeit to a lesser extent (standardized $IE = 0.04$, 95% CI = 0.00 to 0.09; standardized $IE = 0.04$, 95% CI = 0.00 to 0.10, respectively). These findings provide support for Hypothesis 1 for both the UK and India. Generally, the indirect effects for the UK can be considered moderate, whereas those for India are relatively small.

Additionally, we find that the interaction between servant leadership of the line manager (T_1) and trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic (T_1) on PsyCap (T_2) was positive and significant for the UK ($\beta = 0.21$, 95% CI = 0.02 to 0.41), yet it was slightly negative and not significant for India ($\beta = -0.08$, 95% CI = −0.24 to 0.09). Further probing of the significant interaction for the UK reveals that the relationship between trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic and PsyCap was stronger (and significant) when servant leadership of the line manager was high (gradient = 0.42, $t = 3.51$, $p < 0.001$), versus low (gradient = 0.07, $t = 0.69$, $p > 0.05$). Figure 2 illustrates this interaction and shows that PsyCap (T_2) was particularly facilitated in the UK when there were high levels of trust in SLT (T_1) and high levels of line management's servant leadership behavior (T_1). Overall, these results demonstrate support for Hypothesis 2.

To confirm the robustness of our findings, we reran the model without the control variables. All findings remained the same. The coefficients of many hypothesized direct relationships increased slightly by 0.01 to 0.04, the indirect effects linking trust in SLT to outcomes via PsyCap increased by around 0.01 in most cases, and the interaction coefficient between servant leadership and trust in SLT on PsyCap increased by 0.01 in the UK and remained the same (and non-significant) for India.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical implications

Our findings provide support for our model and indicate the significance of trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic in protecting employee well-being, through its

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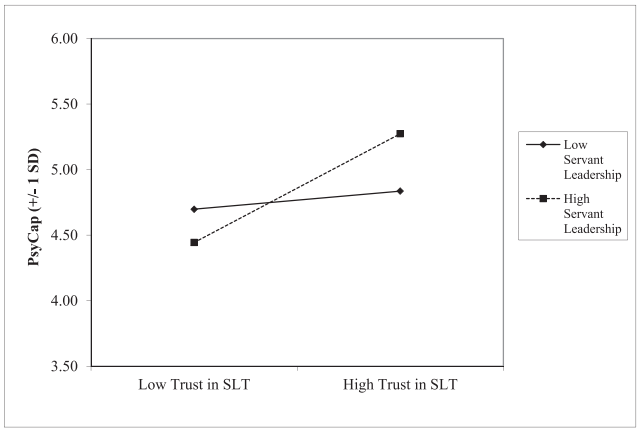
TABLE 2 Results of the multigroup path analysis.

Type of effect	UK sample (N = 210)			India sample (N = 205)		
	Unstandardized B (SE)	Standardized β	Bootstrapped 95% CI	Unstandardized B (SE)	Standardized β	Bootstrapped 95% CI
Direct effects on PsyCap (T_2)						
Predictor—Trust in SLT (T_1)	0.24 (0.08)**	0.26	0.071, 0.407	0.09 (0.04)*	0.19	0.024, 0.353
Moderator—Servant leadership (T_1)	0.05 (0.08)	0.05	−0.105, 0.231	0.11 (0.04)**	0.23	0.066, 0.401
Interaction effects on PsyCap (T_2)						
Trust in SLT × Servant leadership (T_1)	0.17 (0.07)*	0.21	0.019, 0.410	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.08	−0.243, 0.092
Direct effects on work meaningfulness (T_3)						
Predictor—Trust in SLT (T_1)	0.21 (0.09)*	0.15	0.023, 0.281	−0.00 (0.06)	−0.00	−0.158, 0.155
Mediator—PsyCap (T_2)	0.48 (0.10)***	0.34	0.207, 0.465	0.31 (0.13)*	0.21	0.016, 0.359
Direct effects on psychological health (T_3)						
Predictor—Trust in SLT (T_1)	0.10 (0.06)	0.11	−0.033, 0.252	0.06 (0.05)	0.10	−0.051, 0.250
Mediator—PsyCap (T_2)	0.39 (0.06)***	0.41	0.304, 0.519	0.27 (0.10)**	0.22	0.047, 0.368
Indirect effects linking trust in SLT (T_1) to outcomes (T_3)	**Unstandardized IE**	**Standardized IE**	**Bootstrapped 95% CI**	**Unstandardized IE**	**Standardized IE**	**Bootstrapped 95% CI**
Trust in SLT–PsyCap–Work meaningfulness	0.12 (0.05)	0.09	0.022, 0.153	0.03 (0.02)	0.04	0.000, 0.094
Trust in SLT–PsyCap–Psychological health	0.09 (0.03)	0.11	0.031, 0.173	0.03 (0.02)	0.04	0.002, 0.100

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; PsyCap, psychological capital; SLT, senior leadership team.
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.



Note. SLT = senior leadership team; PsyCap = psychological capital.

FIGURE 2 Interaction between trust in the senior leadership team's (SLT's) response to the pandemic and line manager's servant leadership, on psychological capital (PsyCap), for the UK

effects on PsyCap. Our research makes three key contributions. First, we are able to highlight the significance of trust in the SLT in preserving employee well-being, which otherwise suffers during a pandemic (Sibley et al., 2020). We therefore help to extend research on trust referents by focusing on the SLT, as well as contributing to broadening study of the boundary conditions of trust, through our focus on line management's servant leadership (Dirks & De Jong, 2022). It indeed seems to be the case that during uncertain and crisis situations, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, employees look to their leaders for support and guidance (Rudolph et al., 2020), with trust in leadership considered important for effectively navigating the resultant uncertainty (Ahern & Loh, 2020) and for maintaining employee well-being (Inceoglu et al., 2018). When employees trust their SLT, who were tasked with navigating the organization through the pandemic effectively, employees are not unnecessarily expending their finite resources in being distracted and worried about the SLT's decisions/actions and the impact this could have for them (e.g., Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Our results demonstrated that this was more pronounced for the UK sample than the India sample. Cross-cultural differences in power distance may cautiously explain why employees in India are less likely to evaluate the trustworthiness of their SLT (Hofstede, 2001). There is, for instance, some research to indicate that in Asian contexts, leadership can be more effective due to the acceptance of power distance between leaders and followers (Dulebohn et al., 2017), though admittedly there are inconclusive findings regarding cross-cultural variation in trust (Dirks & De Jong, 2022), warranting greater research here.

Second, we move beyond a superficial focus on COR theory through conceptual integration of resource caravans and caravan passageways (Hobfoll, 2011), which

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have received limited attention (e.g., Booth-LeDoux et al., 2020). Our study indicates that as per COR theory, trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic may protect employees from resource loss, which might otherwise arise through concern and worry about how the SLT is navigating the pandemic. Because the theory stipulates one needs resources to gain additional resources to protect from resource loss and maintain well-being, this may allow employees to gain additional resources in the form of PsyCap, given its positive association with trust in the SLT's response to the pandemic, in our study. Based on Hobfoll's (2011) conceptual work on resource caravans and passageways, we argue that our results may go some way in indicating that the line manager's servant leadership could indeed manifest as a resource caravan passageway, which provides a resource-protecting and -enriching environment, strengthening the relationship between trust in the SLT's response and PsyCap (i.e., resource caravan; see Peterson et al., 2011). As predicted, because servant leadership is better aligned with Western prototypes of effective leadership (Brodbeck et al., 2004; Eva et al., 2019), it is more likely to act as a resource caravan passageway in the UK.

Finally, we contribute to the servant leadership literature in two ways. We move beyond the predominant focus on the application of social (-learning, -identity, and -exchange) theories and address the call by Eva et al. (2019) to apply alternative theoretical perspectives like COR theory. Although these existing perspectives have been useful in helping to explain the processes of servant leadership, broadening the theoretical perspectives employed can further the nomological network and empirical avenues in servant leadership research. We additionally assess the cultural relevance of servant leadership by assessing its effects in a more individualistic and lower power-distance culture (UK) and in a more collectivistic and higher power-distance culture (India) (Hofstede Insights, 2022). More specifically, because of servant leadership's Western underpinning, horizontal approach, and follower-centric focus (see Eva et al., 2019), it arguably better aligns with the cultural prototypes of effective leadership in the UK (Brodbeck et al., 2004). Accordingly, because servant leadership of the line manager is more likely to be accepted and effective in the UK as a result of this fit, it may be more likely to act as a resource-protecting and -enriching context in the UK, helping to bolster the effects of trust in the SLT on PsyCap. Contrary to what might be expected, it seems that servant leadership can also be effective in India, supporting existing research on its effectiveness across cultures (e.g., Van Dierendonck et al., 2017). In India, although the interaction was not significant, further examination of our findings indicated that there may be a direct effect of servant leadership on PsyCap (Bouzari & Karatepe, 2017). It may well be that during unique circumstances such as in a pandemic, follower-centric servant leadership may be useful in helping employees to deal with the pandemic and its uncertainty, supporting findings that employees may be particularly concerned about their relationship with their line manager in collectivistic cultures (Khatri et al., 2006). This further aligns with research indicating that servant leadership can be helpful during periods of uncertainty (De Souza & van Dierendonck, 2014).

Limitations and future research directions

In the current study, variables were measured across three time points, in a time-lagged design, in order to capture participants at key points during the pandemic's progress. However, although this might minimize the risk of common method bias, research suggests that it is not enough to establish causality. Instead, future research should measure all variables across all time points in order to establish causal sequences of the relationships proposed, in line with the recommendations of Taris et al. (2021).

We also note that although we established a good level of validity and reliability within the study, the psychological health measure was found to be on the boundary of acceptable reliability within the India sample ($\alpha = 0.69$ vis-à-vis 0.70 and above - acceptable level). Although such measures have been validated across various countries (including India—Endsley et al., 2017; Kashyap & Singh, 2017), future research should investigate the reliability of psychological health measures within the Indian context.

Practical implications

Evidence is clear that crises such as the pandemic can have substantial effects on employee well-being (Liu et al., 2021). The maintenance and development of PsyCap is a useful way to mitigate such negative effects (Turliuc & Candel, 2021). Our results suggest that the SLT and line managers play an important role in this connection. More specifically, our research highlights the role of trust in the SLT, in addition to line managers' servant leadership, in protecting employee well-being during crises and highly uncertain situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic, although servant leadership seems to operate differently in India versus the UK.

Our results indicate that trust in the SLT is an important protective factor for employees during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic in that it relates to PsyCap and, hence, to well-being. The SLT can develop trust by demonstrating outward support and concern for employee well-being (Schaubroeck et al., 2011), engaging in self-sacrificial behaviors that are related to trust in leadership (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2005), as well demonstrating the three factors of trustworthiness (ability, benevolence, and integrity; Dirks & De Jong, 2022). Moreover, during challenging and uncertain times such

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as organizational downsizing, leaders can build trust through transparency and remaining positive (Norman et al., 2010), as well as engaging in consistent open communication with workers to establish and maintain trust (O'Donovan et al., 2021).

Line management's servant leadership also seems important in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, although there were cross-cultural differences here. Line management's servant leadership enhanced the relationship between trust in the SLT's response and PsyCap in the UK, but not India. Moreover, at the bivariate level, line management's servant leadership was more consistently related to employee well-being in the UK compared with India. Nevertheless, owing to the direct effects of servant leadership on PsyCap in India, we suggest that line management's servant leadership is an important consideration in the context of crises, perhaps to different degrees or in different ways between countries. Eva et al. (2019) suggest that in order to encourage servant leadership, practitioners need to develop a servant leadership culture whereby leaders prioritize their followers' needs and encourage selflessness in their followers, through boosting sharing and helping behaviors among them. They additionally advise organizations to select prosocially motivated and conscientious individuals and invest in servant leadership training for these individuals.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nishat Babu: Conceptualization; data curation; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; writing - original draft. **Luke Fletcher:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; writing - original draft. **Shaun Pichler:** Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; writing - review and editing. **Pawan Budhwar:** Data curation; funding acquisition; resources.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Aston University provided internal funding for this project.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interests for this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Nishat Babu https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3301-9472
Luke Fletcher https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7238-3480

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How to cite this article: Babu, N., Fletcher, L., Pichler, S. & Budhwar, P. (2023) What's trust got to do with it? Examining trust in leadership, psychological capital, and employee well-being in a cross-national context during Covid-19. *European Management Review*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12561

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