

Servant Leadership in UK Organisations; a Quantitative Investigation of Moral Reasoning Orientation.

Purpose of the study

In general, the religious, philosophical or ideological roots of servant leadership seem to have promoted the idea that the leadership theory is most suitable for non-profit or charitable organisations. Such criticisms have also been echoed by scholars such as Anderson (2009). Servant leadership is broadly composed of the moral and service dimensions (Ehrhart, 2004; Greenleaf, 1977; Lemoine, Hartnell & Leroy, 2019). While much work has been done regarding the service dimension, the moral dimension has been somewhat neglected or is at best in its nascent stage and requiring of further empirical corroborations (Levitt & Aligo, 2013). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to debunk the alleged notions and criticisms against servant leadership and re-emphasise its relevance in both private and public organisations by evidencing its existence as perceived by employees. Furthermore, it will also contribute to bridging the gap in knowledge regarding the antecedents of the theory (Lanctot & Irving, 2007).

The study is particularly important because leaders' awareness of their moral disposition can support their moral development. This is crucial at these unprecedented times when employees need leaders who can handle moral dilemmas or situations requiring of moral judgement. More so, due to the malfeasance within organisations, the promotion of morality in leadership is utterly necessary (Schminke, Ambrose & Neubaum, 2005; Liu, 2019) and leaders' awareness of their moral disposition can support their moral development.

Key words: moral reasoning orientation, ethics of justice, ethics of care, servant leadership, conscience

Theoretical background

Servant leadership (SL) was proposed by Robert Greenleaf as a moral principle where leadership is annexed to service such that the leader puts the needs of followers first. SL theory has been largely linked to ethics, values, virtue and moral reasoning (Graham, 1991; Lanctot & Irving, 2010; Russell, 2001; Whestone, 2002). However, no single study has focused on moral dimension of servant leadership grounded in the two moral reasoning orientations of ethics of care and ethics of justice.

Ethics of care (EOC) emphasises the servant leaders' empathy, care and concern for staff as the leaders' basis for decision making (Gilligan, 1982) and ethics of justice (EOJ) is the Cognitive theory of moral development that entails making moral decisions based on moral principles, rationality, rights, consistency and universal laws (Kohlberg, 2008). These were underpinned by the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This vicarious learning theory is used to further understand the relationships between servant leaders and their followers; especially how the leader's behaviours are perceived by their followers and how these behaviours impact the followers' motivation to serve. In essence, the relevance of this theory in this study does not only lie in its prevalence in the field (Eva et al., 2018), but in the elements that support and explain the observable role modelling relationship between servant leaders and their followers.

Covey (1977) in situating morality within the concept of SL rightly stated that moral authority begins when humans follow their conscience and universal principles. This idea of following universal principles is homogenous to the Kohlberg's concept of justice ethics. Hence, the researcher hypothesises that servant leaders will have a higher propensity towards the ethics of justice than the ethics of care (Graham, 1991; Sendjaya et al., 2008) even if both orientations are relevant (Simola et al., 2011). Finally, servant leadership was proposed by Greenleaf (1977) as a theory that is universally relevant, so the study proposes that the perceived behaviours or followers in private and public organisations will be more similar than distinct.

Methodology

The study was based on quantitative methodology, with data collected via questionnaire survey using instruments that are previously validated. The social learning theory also supports the use of the adapted self-descriptive element of the moral orientation measurement scale by Liddell, Halpin and Halpin (1992). This is owing Bandura's (1977) construction of morality as a phenomenon that is neither as a complex and dynamic phenomenon nor as a straight-forward developmental phenomenon dependent on stages as Kohlberg's cognitive theory assumes. That is, it supports the measurement approach of examining the elements of justice and care ethics instead of focusing on the prevalent use of hypothetical dilemmas or a supposed linear view of the stages of moral development aligned to adults.

The servant leadership survey used for this study was designed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). The data was collected from employees in the UK, who were purposively recruited from different organisations with both private (n=109; 52.4%), and public sector representation (n=81; 38.9%) including a number of non-profit and private organisations (n=18; 8.7%) such as charities. After cleaning up the data, 208 responses were analysed using SPSS. A greater number of females (n=111) participated compared to 93 males (44.7%) while four respondents (1.9%) left their gender undisclosed. The respondents had a total of 101 male leaders (48.6%), with an almost similar number of female leaders (n=102; 49%), but 2.4% preferred not to state their leader's gender. Most of the leaders as expected were first-line managers/team leaders (n=126, 60.58%), some, especially rated by participants who were leaders themselves, were middle-level managers (n=54, 25.96%), while some rated top managers (n=28; 13.46%).

Findings and Discussion

An independent T-test was conducted to examine the servant leadership (SL) scores for public and private organisations. The result shows no significant difference in the scores for public firms (M= 135.74, SD=19.93) and private organisations (M=131.48, SD=24.69) $t = (186.7) = 1.32, p = .204$ (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 4.7, 95% CI: -2.13 to 10.65) was small (eta squared = .009). Hence, the hypothesis that there are no statistical differences between how followers in for-profit and those in public organisations perceive their leaders' observable servant leadership behaviours is accepted.

Hence, debunking Anderson's (2009) critique that servant leadership is a soft ideology more suitable for non-profit organisations than profit-driven institutions. An understanding of the consistent servant behaviours in both private and public organisations is important. This is because it supports the notion that any organisation can embark on servant leadership training. It seems reasonable to suggest that regardless of the sector or industry, organisations should focus on developing servant leaders who will empower workplace conditions to promote employee commitment.

Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to uncover the relationship between moral orientation and perceived SL behaviours. The result shows a medium positive correlation between SL and ethics of justice ($r=.476$ $p < .01$) and no significant correlation between SL and EOC. Upon further analysis, the multiple regression reveals that SL is significantly predicted by EOJ and is not predicted by EOC. About 23% of the variance in SL is predicted by the total measure of ethics. EOJ made a greater contribution to the model with a beta of 4.7. In essence, servant leaders' behaviours are predicted more by their ethics of justice orientation than their ethics of care orientation. Hence, the hypothesis that servant leadership has higher levels of ethics of justice than ethics of care orientation is accepted.

This justice-based orientation is important for servant leadership practices because it promises the use of consistent procedures. Such consistency can be perceived favourably by employees compared to the use of biased or subjective methods. Subjective treatments could make employees feel that they are treated unequally resulting in negative behaviours (Walumbwa, Hartnell & Oke, 2010). As earlier stated, for servant leaders, it is not a matter of convenience to be moral. It is a crucial requirement because they are also required to use both justifiable means and ends (Covey, 1977) and the ethics of justice seems to be the most suitable orientation given that it encompasses both deontological and consequentialist elements. More so, the results support the notion that the differences between SL and other leadership theories are based on its objective ontology (Sendjaya, 2015).

Hence, servant leaders need to be objective about their decisions by ensuring that they use justifiable means for good outcomes. This is particularly important for high executive-level

leaders, who usually set the organisational goals in strategic and ethical domains (Jordan, et al. 2013) and influence organisational values, which followers in turn would adopt (Ho & Lin, 2016). Additionally, conducting this research has shown that the servant leadership theory can be extended with an inclusion of the moral dimension which differentiates servant leadership from other forms of leadership (Sendjaya et al., 2008). This can then be added to the adopted servant leadership scale which is amongst the three robust measures in the field (Eva et al., 2019) though lacking the moral dimension.

Contribution and conclusion

This study makes an original contribution to the field of servant leadership on three fronts. First, it shows that any organisation can adopt the servant leadership theory and it is suitable for a time like this. Liu (2019) echoed this by stating that in the current service-driven economy, servant leadership practices should be incorporated into organisational strategies since it has the desired moral, relational and service elements. Second, it evidences the moral aspects of servant leadership by not only affirming its conceptual connections with morality but re-emphasising the unique embodiments of servant leadership. The study confirms the existence of both moral orientations while laying emphasis on the existence of objective moral laws. This means that servant leaders do not make decisions arbitrarily or based on their feelings. After all, the world of work is influenced or governed by policies, employment regulations and laws of the state (White, 2009).

Third, this evaluation of cognitive reasoning can be a positive starting point for promoting the leaders' moral development, which will enable them to handle moral conflicts and make more reflective moral decisions. It also supports the thesis that both orientations are relevant and applicable by every individual (Simola, Barling & Turner, 2010) though evident in varying levels dependent on the dilemma or challenges faced (Haviv & Leman, 2002). In addition, since this study offers an ethical dimension based on the two moral orientations, it makes up for the inadequacies of the SLBS, where Sendjaya and colleagues (2008) only focused on 'responsible-morality' elements which measures the ethical disposition and justice orientation of servant leaders.

The practical implication of this study is that it supports the theses for moral development which has not been a prominent aspect of development amongst employees or leaders focus on especially when designing their professional development plans. HR practitioners and leadership development professionals can consider the ethical perspectives of candidates to be recruited into management roles and also offer them relevant moral development programs (Simola et al., 2011). This moral education is crucial given the levels of sexual harassment, verbal abuse, fraud, bribery, corruption and other corporate wrongdoing (TUC, 2016; CIPD, 2019), there is possibly a low level of awareness amongst employees. Such moral education can enable leaders and employees alike to be self-aware of their ethical dispositions, bias and the predominant tendencies and prepare them to make better ethical decisions beneficial not only to themselves but the organisation at large (Schminke, et al., 2005).

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