Abstract of Chapter 6 – Discussion

The full version of this chapter includes additional theoretical implications, practical implications, and future research directions. Due to space restrictions, references are available upon request.

Given the large number of hypotheses and predictions tested in this study, this section opens with a restatement of the major findings, illustrated in Figure 5 and primarily contained within the analytical models of moderated mediation. Servant leadership affected all three predicted outcomes of employee voice, in-role performance, and subordinate servant leadership behaviors, through a variety of different mechanisms and some contingencies. As predicted, servant leadership behaviors by supervisors were linked to subordinate prosocial motivation and positive psychological capital, although those effects proved to be dependent upon subordinate female gender role schema, such that servant leadership was effective at growing these personal characteristics when subordinates were high in female gender role schema, but less effective for subordinates low in female gender role schema. Of the two mediators, there was some evidence that prosocial motivation further impacted subordinate voice behaviors, whereas psychological capital had positive effects on both subordinate voice and subordinate servant leadership. The moderated mediation hypotheses involving the gender of the leader were not supported, but the proposed interaction did serve to predict all three outcomes in a direct manner, such that servant leadership exhibited main effects on voice, performance, and employee servant leadership when the manager was female. The two moderators therefore operated in conjunction with servant leadership in strikingly different manners: manager sex moderated direct effects of servant leadership, whereas subordinate gender role schema moderated the indirect, transformative impact of servant leadership.

Overall, these results support servant leadership's usefulness in the modern organizational context, as well as the social learning approach to servant leadership, predictions of gender role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), Greenleaf's (1970) original proposal of servant leadership's contagious nature, and the influence processes outlined in this dissertation. The temporally lagged nature of this study is worthy of note, in that nearly all major servant leadership research to date (Ehrhart, 2004; Hu & Liden, 2011; Hunter et al., 2013; Liden et al., 2014b; Liden et al., 2008; Schaubroeck et al., 2011; van
Dierendonck et al., 2013) has been cross-sectional (see Walumbwa et al., 2010, for an exception), providing additional evidence for servant leadership's effectiveness. As one of the first studies to investigate moderating boundary conditions of servant leadership, as well as the first to test new mediators (prosocial motivation and PsyCap) and outcomes (voice and subordinate servant leadership), this research builds our understanding of why, how, and when servant leadership works, in accordance with the basic guidelines of conceptual understanding and theory (Whetten, 1989).

One important contribution of this study is the proposal of a new conceptual definition of servant leadership itself, as the construct has gone mostly undefined in both academic journals and practitioner books and magazines. Even when servant leadership is defined in research or practice, it is usually explained as either "a style of leadership which...", leaving its true meaning somewhat vague, or it is defined by its outcomes, as is the case with Greenleaf's popular definition of servant leadership as creating others who are "healthier, wiser, freer", etc. (Greenleaf, 1970). By proposing servant leadership as influence behaviors, manifested humbly and ethically within relationships and oriented toward follower development, empowerment, and continuous and meaningful improvement for all stakeholders, I hope to contribute to ongoing debates as to what leadership in general, and servant leadership specifically, represent. This proposed definition of servant leadership is not the first proposed by scholars, and I hold no illusions that it will be the last. However, even if this definition is not accepted by the general servant leadership community, it is my hope that its introduction will at least catalyze a discussion that has so far been lacking: beyond the operational definition, what exactly does servant leadership mean? Given the community's progress in studying servant leadership, it seems somewhat backward that this discussion has not yet taken place; indeed, agreement on conceptual definition of a construct is a necessary precondition to strong and testable theory regarding that construct (Hempel, 1965).

Although this study is not the first to propose (Liden et al., 2014a; Russell & Stone, 2002) nor test (Liden et al., 2014b; Walumbwa et al., 2010) the social learning perspective to explain servant leadership's outcomes, I contribute to the literature by producing evidence for its usefulness in studying servant leadership and empirically demonstrating new avenues by which it may operate. Indeed, given the
explicit importance of role modeling and subordinate development in early servant leadership theorizing (Graham, 1991; Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008), it is surprising that more servant leadership research has not examined it from a social learning angle. Mechanisms such as trust and reciprocity are commonly cited in leadership research (Dirks, 2000; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and undoubtedly play a role in servant leadership processes, but do not speak to the fundamental transformation of individuals' motives and abilities suggested by servant leadership theory. It is feasible that such servant leadership development takes place over significant periods of time (Bandura, 1977b), so mechanisms such as trust and social exchange may serve as initial or parallel processes by which servant leaders impact outcomes. Evidence exists for many mechanisms of servant leadership's effectiveness, and this research supports the role of social learning, rather than providing evidence against other mechanisms. Future studies should consider modeling relationships which contain multiple mechanisms simultaneously, so as to better understand how these mechanisms might work together, vary sequentially, or even interact with one another.

To my knowledge, this is the first empirical test of prosocial motivation and positive psychological capital as mediators of servant leadership, although both have been theorized as likely mechanisms of servant and general positive leadership (e.g. Liden et al., 2008; Luthans et al., 2007a). Results here do support the contingent theory of servant leadership presented in this dissertation, although with some meaningful caveats. For instance, this study's results support contingent links from servant leadership to prosocial motivation and psychological capital, supporting the social learning approach, but both mediators were curiously unrelated to in-role performance in my analyses (servant leadership was itself directly related to in-role performance, moderated by leader gender, as will be discussed below). Both mediators have been linked to various types of performance in previous empirical scholarship (Grant, 2008; Korsgaard et al., 1997; Luthans et al., 2007a), suggesting that the lack of a result here may have been driven by the sample. There is some evidence that the nature of Organization 1 (which was the largest in my multi-organizational sample) may have played a role; prior to data collection, I conducted several qualitative interviews at this large profit-focused financial transactions company. Compared to
similar interviews I have conducted with other organizations, the salience of citizenship seemed somewhat low; both employees and managers commented on how organizational and community citizenship (both conceptually aligned with prosocial motivation and psychological capital) had never historically been seen as very important within the company. If these interviews are generalizable to the company as a whole, this might help to explain the lack of relationship between the mediators and in-role performance. Replication of this study in different types of organizational environments is necessary before any strong conclusions regarding these mediators can be reached.

The relationships of the mediators to the other two outcomes of voice and employee servant leadership behaviors were somewhat stronger. Both are new outcomes of servant leadership untested in previous literature, although voice has been described as a mechanism by which servant leadership might grow procedural justice climates (Walumbwa et al., 2010) and employee enactment of servant leadership is arguably the primary, fundamental outcome of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977, 1996a; Liden et al., 2014a), albeit previously untested. With this in mind, the results of this study are quite encouraging, answering several calls from leadership scholars (Liden et al., 2008; Spears, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011). This research serves as the first scholarship to empirically test and verify the assertion at the heart of servant leadership that those led by servant leaders become wiser, freer, and more likely to become servant leadership themselves (Greenleaf, 1970). This is an important development in this field, in that it speaks to the long-term sustainability of the servant-as-leader approach, provides support for the theoretical and conceptual roots of the construct, and opens promising new lines of research inquiry as to how servant leadership aligns with leader development.

Another major contribution of this study is the integration of gender role congruity theory with the servant leadership approach to identify a female leadership advantage. Sex is often considered one of the most salient factors determining leadership emergence (Kent & Moss, 1994; Schein, 1973), with men nearly universally more likely to emerge as leaders due to implicit "think leader, think male" masculine leader stereotypes (Bem, 1981b; Eagly et al., 1992; Schein, 1973). As leadership has traditionally been seen as dominant, independent, aggressive, forceful, and otherwise typically masculine (Eagly & Karau,
female leaders have struggled with cognitive dissonance in their implementation of leader behaviors, despite the equivalent quality of those behaviors (Morrison et al., 1987). As part of their gender role congruity theory, Eagly and Karau (2002) specifically raised the possibility that women might hold advantages for any less masculine forms of leadership, forms more communal in nature, although they called any such approaches "rare". Over a decade later, this study supports their prediction: although not exclusively communal and feminine, servant leadership is certainly more balanced than most traditional forms of leadership, providing a model by which female and communal gender stereotypes are more closely aligned.

Whereas the gender of the leader moderated the direct link from servant leadership behaviors to the distal outcomes, the female gender role schema of the follower moderated the link from servant leadership to the mediators of prosocial motivation and positive psychological capital. This suggests that gender schema may be a boundary condition of servant leadership unique to its social learning effects, but possibly absent from its effects through other mechanisms. As hypothesized, the effects of servant leadership on mediating subordinate characteristics were strongest when subordinates had higher female gender schemas, consistent with theories of person-supervisor fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), gender congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and similarity attraction (Byrne, 1971). For the proposed social learning processes to take place, employees seemed to need some level of comfort with the more feminine and communal aspects of servant leadership (Bandura, 1977b). As gender role did not moderate direct effects of servant leadership on outcomes, this suggests a question of how subordinates low in female gender schema might be affected by servant leadership initially. Will they come to trust a supervisor over time, sufficient to 'break through' their low female gender schema, or might team processes within a strong servant climate have the same effect? Does the theoretically orthogonal masculine gender schema play a role? Of these, the first question seems especially interesting, and also raises the issue of whether gender schema might itself be changed by exposure to servant leadership, as an individual's gender schema may be somewhat flexible (Eagly & Karau, 2002).
FIGURE 5:
Final model of servant leadership’s contingent effects

- Servant leadership behaviors (by manager)
- Leader gender
- Subordinate female gender schema
- Subordinate Positive Psychological Capital
- Subordinate prosocial motivation
- Subordinate voice behaviors
- Subordinate in-role performance
- Subordinate servant leadership behaviors

Solid lines (——) represent direct links.
Dashed lines (-----) represent moderations.