



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

A Feminist Perspective

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At the heart of this paper is the notion that servant-leadership has potential as a feminism-informed, care-oriented, and gender-integrative approach to organizational leadership. Although there is a significant body of literature on feminist and gender-based interpretations of leadership, the same is not true for servant-leadership. The main contributors to date include Crippen's (2004) narrative inquiry of three women servant-leaders, Eicher-Catt's (2005) feminist critique of servant-leadership, Oner's (2009) and Barbuto and Gifford's (2010) empirical studies of gender differences in servant-leadership, and Ngunjiri's (2010) phenomenological study of African women servant-leaders.

This paper expands the conceptual development of servant-leadership through a feminist framework. The intent is to explore whether the servant-leadership philosophy has potential as a gender-integrative mode of leadership. Gaps in previous research are addressed through a broader scope of feminist analysis and inquiry to servant-leadership. I present a literature review that builds on discussions of gender and feminist perspectives of leadership and servant-leadership in the context of leadership theory, gender, and feminist critique.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP

Traditional perspectives of leadership assume inherent systems of influence and structure for human organization (Chin 2007). Northouse (2007) offered an example of a typical definition of leadership from a popular textbook: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (3). Smircich and Morgan (1982) offered a definition of the leadership process from a feminist perspective: "Leadership is



realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others” (258). Based on the notion that some person (or group) mobilizes systems of power (framing and defining reality) over some other(s) toward the achievement of some goal (framed and defined by whom?) through human organization, leadership especially merits interpretation from a feminist perspective.

In my experience while studying leadership, my fellow colleagues have often expressed common misconceptions about what feminism comprises. There seems to be confusion about what a feminist perspective entails. Some have assumed that if a woman authors a paper, she has implicitly represented a feminist (i.e., a woman’s) perspective. Others have assumed that if the participants in a study are exclusively women, or if the study includes gender as a variable, these studies have necessarily adopted a feminist perspective. If this were true, there would be a plethora of feminist research in the field of leadership. Obviously, this is not the case. Whether or not a piece of leadership research adopts a feminist perspective is not necessarily determined by the gender or sex of the scholar or the gender or sex of research participants, nor is the inclusion of gender or sex as a variable a determining factor of a feminist perspective. Only if the researcher employs feminism as the interpretive framework would a study or theoretical piece constitute a feminist perspective (Hesse-Biber 2007).

To demonstrate these assumptions as misconceptions, I conducted an experimental search of scholarly peer-reviewed journals using the resources from the Foley Center Library at Gonzaga University in the databases Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, PsychInfo, SocIndex, ERIC, and Communication and Mass Media Complete. I initially entered the keyword *leadership* in the subject field and the term *gender* in the title field of the search interface, which yielded 608 results. Entering the term *feminist* in the text field (indicating a full-text search—i.e., do the authors even consider feminism?) to refine the search reduced the number of hits to 65 articles. Entering the term *feminist* in the abstract field (indicating a strong focus in the paper on feminism) narrowed the results to just 19 hits (this search was executed on March 23, 2011). Therefore, of 608 articles claiming the subject *leadership* with *gender* as a motivating keyword for the title, only 19 made *feminism* a sufficiently central concern to merit its discussion in the abstract. This, in my view, demonstrates that including biological sex or gender as a variable may generate knowledge that includes women; it does not necessitate a feminist perspective.



Differences between women and men can be measured quantitatively or interpreted qualitatively; however, whether the research adopts a feminist perspective depends on the questions asked (Hesse-Biber 2007), the conceptual framework (Brooks and Hesse-Biber 2007), and the interpretation of results in relation to a feminist agenda (Miner-Rubino and Jayaratne 2007). The degree to which gendered power systems become a central theme in a piece of scholarship can be considered an indication of convergence with feminist interpretation (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007). Acknowledging where gender differences are perceived and can or cannot be verified is a first step toward questioning why they exist, in what context they exist, what systems create them, and how strategies toward integration can be devised.

There are several ways researchers and theorists have approached examining leadership in the context of feminism. One is to use perceived gender differences in leadership as a foundation for feminist interpretation, such as understanding the glass ceiling (see Eagly and Sczesny 2009). Another way is to question and challenge the systems of gender operating in leadership, for example through phenomenological study of the meaning of leadership (see Parker 2005). Yet another way is to deconstruct gendered language and gendered systems that construct perceptions of leadership (see Calás and Smircich 1991). The following is a brief review of these three common approaches to the study of gender in leadership.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LEADERSHIP

Extensive research has been conducted concerning gender differences in leadership styles (Eagly and Carli, 2004). Eagly and Johnson (1990) and Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003) conducted meta-analyses of empirical studies on gender differences in leadership styles. Both of these meta-analyses produced findings that reinforced the traditional assignment of gender-bound attributes (Eagly and Carli 2004). Results showed that women and men tended to differ in their application of democratic and participative style (more typical of women) versus an authoritative and directive style (more typical of men) (Eagly and Johnson 1990). In addition, women exceeded men on measures of transformational behavior, individual consideration, and contingent reward (Eagly et al. 2003). Through interpretation of research findings, Eagly and her colleagues, have contributed significantly to understanding the sources of difference. Part of this work included turning



the focus to the glass-ceiling phenomenon (Eagly and Sczesny 2009), gender congruity, stereotyping, and discrimination (Eagly and Carli 2004), and the creation of a new metaphor for women's challenges in aspiring to leadership: the labyrinth (Eagly and Carli). Much mainstream research on gender in leadership, however, remains limited to examining gender differences between women and men as leaders and lacks critical interpretation (Ford 2005).

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Since roughly the last decade of the twentieth century, research on how women lead has become more frequent. Making women the primary subjects of study has been a process through which scholars contributed to the inclusion of women in leadership research. Qualitative studies on women leaders have also often supported stereotypical gender notions. One well-known author who brought the subject of women leaders into mainstream discussion is Helgesen (1995). In her book, Helgesen described women's methods of leadership as striking more of a balance than men's. The balance was largely driven by self-care, relationships, and social concern (Helgesen). Madden (2007) claimed that collaboration is "the most prominent theme" in feminist leadership (192). This claim was supported by Fine (2005 2007), who described collaboration as giving voice, listening, empowering, and team building. Fine (2007) also concluded that the women in her study "discursively constructed a vision of leadership through *a moral discourse of leadership*" (182). The four principles of leadership the women in Fine's (2007) study described were making a positive contribution, collaboration, open communication, and honesty in relationships (183). Discussion of citizenship, community, information sharing, ethics, and attending to relational aspects of leading supported emergent themes (Fine). In her study of African American women leaders, Parker (2005) produced findings that reinforced several of Fine's (2007) themes. Parker's (2005) study also added a dimension of interactive leadership described as communicating knowledge (information sharing), being accessible, and role modeling. Parker revised Fine's (2007) version of making a positive contribution as "leadership through boundary spanning" (Parker 2005, 84) that challenges fixed ideas of organizational boundaries and extends responsibility to community needs.

The insight gained from exclusively studying women's practice of leadership on the one hand created a space for opening up the androcentric matrix



of leadership. On the other hand, the danger of perpetuating essentialist assumptions of the gender paradigm remains. In response to this warning, Fine (2007) stated: “Discussion of the research on women’s leadership . . . is not intended to essentialize women. . . . The values expressed in the research on women and leadership suggest new ways of theorizing about leadership” (181–82). By focusing exclusively on women’s perspectives of leadership, the field was able to gain new insights and new possibilities for constructing leadership that had been previously ignored by a male-biased perspective.

GENDERED POWER RELATIONS IN LEADERSHIP

Some poststructural feminist and critical scholars (Billing and Alvesson 2000; Brady and Hammett 1999; Calás and Smircich 1991; Johanson 2008; Kark 2004; Smircich and Morgan 1982) who have addressed leadership in a broader organizational context focus primarily on the language of leadership. Discourse analysis and deconstruction are their main tools for interpretation. Such deconstruction feminist analyses of leadership have revealed how leadership discourse is contained within an androcentric matrix. Echoing Eisler (1994), Johanson (2008) pointed out that leadership discourse is not only by default attributed with masculinity, but in attempts to appear gender-neutral, they fail to acknowledge the feminine gendering of new parameters for effective leadership behavior. Findings from Johanson’s (2008) experimental study showed that although contemporary leadership theories may describe and espouse “arguably feminine” behaviors (784), implicit theories of leadership remain strongly stereotypically male. Johanson’s results supported Eagly and Carli’s (2004) conclusions about gender congruence in leadership. Because the role of leader is still so strongly associated with maleness, women encounter discrimination when displaying leadership behaviors that are not congruent with acceptable degrees of masculinity in women (Eagly and Carli 2004).

Viewing leadership through a gendered lens also reveals how the notion of leadership is romanticized. Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985) asserted that by romanticizing leaders and the effects of leadership, followers are better able to cope with organizational ambiguity. Such romantic fantasies and adherence to the mystery of leadership add a satisfying sense of myth to leadership, which permits followers to ascribe responsibility for events and outcomes to the leaders (Meindl et al. 1985). In their analysis of leadership as seduction, Calás and Smircich (1991) pointed out how leadership embodies desire.



Corrupt leadership—as opposed to ethical leadership—seduces and misleads followers (Calás and Smircich 1991). They qualified this analogy further in the sexualized context: whereas a leader is by default a man, a seductress is by default a woman. Such sexualized observations reveal male bias and a heterosexual framework in the leadership matrix. In this way, deconstruction feminist perspectives allow for a critical reflection of how gendered hierarchies of power are implicit in supposedly neutral leadership discourse. This idea will be discussed in connection with servant-leadership later in this chapter.

SUMMARY

This brief review of gender and feminist perspectives of leadership points out several ideas that are important for developing the discussion of servant-leadership and feminism. First, underlying assumptions about leadership and gender generally tend to reflect historical gender stereotyping. Second, failing to acknowledge supposedly feminine aspects of leadership as feminine perpetuates the androcentric gendering of leadership. Third, the continued labeling of traditionally feminine behaviors as feminine is unacceptable for deconstruction feminism. To formulate a gender-integrative perspective of leadership, it is necessary to envision leadership behaviors and attitudes as exclusive to neither women nor men. Indeed, describing gender differences within an androcentric matrix of leadership may only perpetuate essentialist assumptions of gender differences based on biological determinism. Nevertheless, it is equally important to reveal how gender socialization has affected women's perspectives and practices of leadership to open up possibilities for changing the gender hierarchy of leadership. Discovering gender differences in leadership, studying leadership in a gender vacuum, and deconstructing the gendered nature of leadership tend to reinforce instinctive beliefs that evolve through cultural gender socialization. Ultimately, all this work has established is that gender as a social construct permeates leadership phenomena within an androcentric matrix and continues to be reinforced by gendered discourse. As such, the question remains, how do we move beyond gendered leadership toward gender-integrative leadership?

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Servant-leadership literature credits Robert K. Greenleaf with coining the term *servant-leadership* in the essay *The Servant as Leader* from 1970 (Beazley 2003). This vision emerged out of Greenleaf's experiences in the



business world (Spears 2003). Greenleaf (2002) credited his inspiration of the leader as servant to the fictional character Andres Leo in Hesse's (1956/2003) *Journey to the East*. Leo, initially characterized as a servant, was later revealed as a leader who served others. This image prompted Greenleaf to document his ideas in essays that were later published.

Servant-leadership has as its focus the mutually determinate development of individuals and strengthening of community (Spears 2003, 19). Greenleaf (2002) clearly identified the developmental needs of followers and community needs as the driving forces of servant-leadership. The centrality of this needs-focused attitude includes the validity of individual needs (van Dierendonck and Heeren 2006). In a servant-led organization, people take priority over issues (Stone, Russell, and Patterson 2003). The attitude of the servant-leader is that of an equal who accepts the imperfection of others and oneself and is able to see the potential for growth and healing (Greenleaf 2003). The servant-leader's first impulse is to listen and the first desire is to serve (Greenleaf 2002), such that beneficial transformation occurs in the followers (Greenleaf 2003). In his essay on servant-leadership, forgiveness, and social justice, Ferch (2004) noted that the human capacities to discern one's own faults, to seek and grant forgiveness, and to heal relationships are central ideas of servant-leadership. Servant-leadership in this way asserts that genuinely building up people's spirits and abilities also builds community; the formation and achievement of organizational objectives follow.

The servant-leader exercises integrity and care, applies foresight and cognitive capacity to shape activity, and provides opportunity in the best interest of followers (Greenleaf 2003, 65). Greenleaf also stressed the importance of an attitude of social justice (Ferch 2004) and moral integrity in the servant-leader. The basic assumption of servant-leadership questions the structure-bound and prevailing image of leaders as dominating and being served by followers. The notion of the leader serving others, regardless of status or structural power, challenges culturally persistent norms of leadership as a manifestation of hierarchies (Page and Wong 2000). Greenleaf (2003) thus turned the predominant vision of organizational hierarchy—with leaders at the top of the pyramid—upside down (Page and Wong 2000). Servant-leadership advocates flattened structures, collaborative leadership, individual initiative, and commitment (Greenleaf 2002). The servant-leader acts as *primus inter pares*, "first among equals" (74), and is thus shielded from the isolation and immense burden of sole responsibility. By promoting shared leadership and follower-centered leadership, Greenleaf proposed to demythologize (70) and deromanticize (41) the heroic lone-wolf leader.



Each individual employee is summoned to exercise mutually reinforcing servant-leadership: organizational members for institutions and for each other, and institutions for social responsibility within communities and social justice globally (Greenleaf 2003, 37).

Theoretical work in servant-leadership has also led to empirical work. Some of the most comprehensive reviews of servant-leadership models and instruments were conducted by van Dierendonck (2010), van Dierendonck and Heeren (2006), and van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). For the purposes of this literature review, I have summarized the arguments of van Dierendonck and Nuijten underlying their operationalization of distinguishing constructs of servant-leadership. In their development of a new servant-leadership model, van Dierendonck and Nuijten described eight constructs, which, they asserted, solved some of the deficiencies of previous models and differentiate servant-leadership from other leadership models. These constructs are Empowerment, Accountability, Standing-Back, Humility, Authenticity, Courage, Forgiveness (interpersonal acceptance), and Stewardship (251–252). Within these constructs, I identified some underlying values and attitudes as follows. A relational focus is evident in the constructs of Empowerment, Forgiveness, and Accountability. Power-sharing and participative aspects of leadership are represented in the constructs of Standing-Back and Stewardship, as well as Empowerment and Accountability. The capacity for adequately distributing one's own personal resources and downplaying self-promotion can be interpreted from the constructs of Empowerment, Accountability, Standing-Back, and Forgiveness. An attitude to ethics and social justice is implied in the constructs of Humility, Authenticity, Courage, and Forgiveness.

In summary, I assert that the overarching elements of servant-leadership can be expressed as (a) valuing people, relationships, and community above issues, (b) sharing of power and decision-making in human organization, (c) finding balance between well-being and performance, and (d) placing ethics and social justice above delusions of personal and in-group grandeur. The purpose of the subsequent sections is to develop a deeper understanding of servant-leadership, its assets and its flaws, and to highlight aspects of servant-leadership. The following discussion looks at servant-leadership first through two frameworks of leadership theory: transformational leadership and ethical leadership. In the following, I presented servant-leadership through the lens of gender, analogous to the preceding section on feminist perspectives of leadership. This review included



critiques of servant-leadership and foremost a discussion of critical feminist deconstruction of servant-leadership.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF LEADERSHIP

Transformational Leadership

Leadership theory has sometimes characterized servant-leadership as a subcategory of transformational leadership (Reinke 2004, 35; Stone, Russell, and Patterson 2003, 2). In Burns's (1978) original conceptualization, he described transformational leadership as having the capacity to raise followers' motivation (20) to transcend individual needs and advance collective purposes (106). Burns's description framed transformational leadership as capable of increasing the moral attitude of followers (Graham 1995). When Bass (1999) operationalized transformational leadership into four dimensions—individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence—it led to transformational leadership shifting focus to a model driven by elevating organizational goals and performance standards above the “selfish” needs of followers (13). Bass saw the transformational leader as the dominant force for determining collective organizational objectives and subsequently aligning followers' needs with them (13). Transformational leadership also emphasizes organizational results according to Reinke (2004). Although servant-leadership might express certain constructs of transformational leadership, the focus is different.

Servant-leadership clearly identifies the developmental and community needs of followers as the driving force and includes the validity of individual needs (Greenleaf 2002 27; van Dierendonck and Heeren 2006, 149). In an environment of servant-leadership, people take priority over issues (Stone, Russell, and Patterson 2003, 8). The servant-leader, in contrast to the transformational leader, aligns organizational objectives with human needs (Mayer, Bardes, and Piccolo 2008; Stone, Russell, and Patterson 2003). As organizational goals fulfill the needs of those served, beneficial transformation occurs in the organizational members (Greenleaf 2003, 43), and consequently the community and society. This alignment can be attributed to the servant-leader's first impulse to listen and first desire to serve (Greenleaf 2002, 31). In this way, servant-leadership addresses issues of subjectivity and the situatedness of organizational members differently from transformational leadership. Although transformational leadership, as described by



Bass (1999), also expresses other-centered constructs such as intellectual stimulation and individual consideration, transformational leadership differs from servant-leadership in its focus on organizational objectives and preference to value performance above human need. The debate about human needs versus organizational goals in leadership places the ethical component of leadership in the foreground.

Ethical Leadership

Prosser (2010) delivered a compelling argument that servant-leadership is better understood as a philosophy of leadership rather than an academic theory or leadership model. Indeed, Greenleaf's (2003) vision of servant-leadership was not originally developed through academic scholarship. The philosophy perspective of servant-leadership supported the categorization of servant-leadership under the subheadings of normative and ethical leadership by Johnson (2008) and Northouse (2007), respectively. Indeed, theoretical discussion of servant-leadership has often referenced ethical frameworks such as *agapáo* (Ayers 2008; Patterson and Stone 2004), virtue ethics (Lanctot and Irving 2007), and the five major religious worldviews (Kriger and Seng 2005). Graham (1995) presented an early analysis of servant-leadership in an ethical framework in the context of Kohlberg's (1984) stages of moral development. Graham (1995) summarized, "Servant leaders serve their followers best when they model and also encourage others not only to engage in independent moral reasoning, but also to follow it up with constructive participation in organizational governance" (51). In Graham's assessment, transformational and servant-leaders encourage followers to engage in post-conventional moral reasoning. The suggestion is that leaders promote followers' moral development by operating from a standpoint of superior morality. This assertion is more congruent with Burns's (1978) description of the transformational leader's moral imperative to operate at higher levels of moral reasoning and elevate others to higher levels of moral behavior (455).

In contrast to the implications of Graham's (1995) assessment, Patterson (2004) asserted that servant-leaders possess an attitude of humility. Greenleaf (2003) stressed the importance of an attitude of social justice and moral integrity in the servant-leader in relation to those-served. Greenleaf encouraged all organizational members to serve others' needs



such that those served are at least no worse off than before. He also emphasized the need for servant-leaders to engage in self-reflection and regeneration to ensure that self-care is not neglected. In the context of self-care and concern for others' needs, the attitude of self-in-relation (Fletcher 2004) present in servant-leadership promotes a relational ethic of leadership that is much stronger than in transformational leadership. Neither the hierarchical structure of a Kohlbergian pure justice approach to moral reasoning (Graham 1995) nor the hierarchical structure of a Bass-Burnsian concept of determining organizational objectives adequately characterize a servant-leadership approach to those served or the one serving. The subjectivity of those-served takes on a powerful position in the servant-leadership process. By virtue of the servant-leader attitudes of stewardship, listening, and building community (Spears 2002) the situatedness of those served is assigned higher ethical value than in transformational leadership.

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

By linking two terms that traditionally denote subordination (servant) and domination (leader), Greenleaf (2003) disrupted a long-established understanding of power structures. From a feminist perspective, such disruption is part of the process toward achieving gender equity. However, paradoxes create ambiguities that demand interpretation. As such, servant-leadership provides an interesting playing field for exploring gender-integrative approaches to leadership. The following provides a discussion of the paradox of servant and leader from a gender perspective.

The assumption that leadership is embedded in hierarchies often goes unquestioned (Iannello 1992), as do many systems within predominantly masculinized contexts, such as organizations (Madden 2007). That top-down hierarchies in organizations often remain unquestioned is a claim echoed in feminist perspectives of the gender hierarchy. In her deconstruction of servant-leadership rhetoric, Eicher-Catt (2005) pointed out that the feminine and the masculine, based on traditional gender hierarchies, are associated with subjugation and domination, respectively. In her interpretation, the aspect of servant would be equivalent to the feminine and the aspect of leader equivalent to the masculine. This observation by Eicher-Catt serves as a fundamental framework for examining servant-leadership constructs in terms of gender.



Among the vast literature on servant-leadership, both academic and popular, one of the most often cited and relatable interpretations of servant-leadership constructs came from Spears (2002). From his readings of Greenleaf, Spears defined a set of ten characteristics that he believed to be the core of servant-leader behavior and activity: listening, empathizing, healing, practicing stewardship (serving the needs of others), exercising commitment to the growth of people, building community, foresight, conceptualization, awareness, and persuasion (Spears 2002). In my view, six of the characteristics distinguish servant-leadership from other forms of leadership, and the other four are more strongly associated with traditional notions of leadership (Reynolds 2011). These distinguishing characteristics, or behaviors, are practicing stewardship, listening, empathizing, healing, exercising commitment to the growth of people, and building community. The other group comprises foresight, conceptualization, awareness, and persuasion. Leadership theory provides some theoretical and empirical support for my claim, which I outlined briefly in a previous publication and reiterate here in greater depth.

Based on several predominant findings of leadership scholars, the behaviors—foresight, conceptualization, awareness, and persuasion—of servant-leadership can be described as *leader* behaviors (Reynolds 2011). For example, through a comprehensive analysis of research and theoretical work on servant-leadership, van Dierendonck (2010) related aspects of these four characteristics to the key characteristic *providing direction*. “Providing direction” is one of the main entries in Merriam-Webster’s (2013) definition of *leading* and virtually synonymous with the concept of leadership. Later, van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) related this key characteristic to their constructs of servant-leadership Courage and Accountability. Van Dierendonck (2010) clarified this connection as follows: “A servant-leader’s take on providing direction is to make work dynamic and “tailor made” (based on follower abilities, needs, and input). In this sense, providing direction is about providing the right degree of accountability. . . . It can also imply creating new ways or new approaches to old problems” (8). Historically, leadership theory offered a variety of models that define leadership in terms of traits and behaviors. Leadership trait theory defined “forward-looking” as one of the most dominant leadership traits (Northouse 2007). This trait—forward-looking—corresponds, in my interpretation, to Spears’s (2002) servant-leader characteristic *foresight*. Concepts from theories of visionary leadership also provided support. For example, Kouzes and Posner (2002)



and Sashkin and Sashkin (2003) both described transformational leadership in models sometimes referred to as visionary leadership. Their concept of vision, in my view, can be equivocated with *foresight* (Reynolds 2011).

The servant-leader characteristic of *conceptualization* can also be associated with concepts from transformational leadership theory (Reynolds 2011). Conceptualization can be thought of as a certain kind of cognitive ability, a trait that has been described in leadership theory by both Sashkin and Sashkin (2003) and Kouzes and Posner (2002). Other traits and behaviors from leadership theory, such as competence and knowledge of the business (Kouzes and Posner 2002), can be attributed to cognitive ability. Competence, the ability to conceptualize options and solutions cognitively, is often associated with intelligence and critical thought (Reynolds 2011). In his operationalization of transformational leadership, Bass (1999) included the construct of intellectual stimulation as an aspect of leadership. In this way, conceptualization, cognitive capacity, knowledge, and intelligence are applied to stimulate other organizational members intellectually (Reynolds 2011).

The servant-leadership characteristic *awareness* is also an aspect of transformational leadership. Awareness can be understood as both self-awareness and awareness of the (business) environment. Krishnan and Arora (2008) noted that transformational leadership had a high correlation with the constructs self-awareness and public self-consciousness, an awareness of the self and part of a social environment. Kouzes and Posner (2002) asserted that leadership also includes the ability to assess environmental influences. This claim was supported by a study of transformational leadership and situation awareness conducted by Eid et al. (2004) in a military setting. Eid et al. described situation awareness as a construct that includes, for example, perception, memory, and schemas (204). They found that transformational leadership actually predicted situation awareness.

Persuasion is the fourth characteristic of servant-leadership described by Spears (2002) that can be associated with transformational leadership. Several other behaviors that have been associated with leadership can be understood as elements of persuasive behavior (Reynolds 2011). Specifically, the constructs alignment, inspiration, assertiveness, and influence, which are also strongly associated with change leadership (Gill 2003), indicate persuasion in leadership. The leadership construct of assertiveness surfaced out of trait theory (Northouse 2007). In his operationalization of transformational leadership, Bass (1999) described dimensions that included



inspirational motivation and idealized influence. Kouzes and Posner (2002) included in their model the behavior of inspiring others, which also aligned with Bass's (1999) construct of inspirational motivation. Change leadership scholars, such as Gill (2003) and Kotter (1996), wrote extensively about the importance of alignment, for example, aligning followers' goals with organizational goals. Other studies also supported the importance of interpersonal influence in transformational leadership. For example, Eid et al. (2004) found that transformational leadership also predicted interpersonal influence. Foresight, conceptualization, awareness, and persuasion are aspects of servant-leadership that I asserted can be characterized as leader aspects (Reynolds 2011).

Thus, building on Eicher-Catt's (2005) observation of gendered notions associated with the terms servant and leader, I argue that these characteristics can also be associated with socialized gendered notions of behavior. The previous discussion of gender in leadership demonstrated the strong association of leadership with the masculine. Numerous gender assessments of leadership supported the claim that leadership is still predominantly associated with male socialization (Coleman 2003) and masculinity, despite cultural differences in the construction of masculinity and leadership (Fine 2007). It follows that the leader characteristics of servant-leadership would comprise the more traditionally masculine aspect of leadership. Further support of my conceptualization of gender in servant-leadership was provided by Barbuto and Gifford (2010). They noted in their study of sex differences in servant-leadership dimensions that these four servant-leader characteristics—foresight, conceptualization, awareness, and persuasion—are predominantly associated with agency and masculine behavior.

The following presents a discussion of servant characteristics as the feminine aspect of servant-leadership. In the context of servant-leadership, Oner (2009) examined aspects of leadership typically associated with servant-leadership in Turkish business employees. She described these characteristics—empathy for others, authentic listening, nurturance, and caring—as feminine. Barbuto and Gifford (2010) pointed out that needs-focused and other-centered characteristics are more strongly associated with feminine behavior. These traditionally feminine socialized behaviors, I argue, are embedded in what Northouse (2007) delineated as the relationship-oriented aspects of leadership (in contrast to the task-oriented aspects). Integrative behaviors—such as dialogue, nonviolent conflict resolution—also traditionally belong to the realm of feminine socialization (Eisler 1994).



In leadership theory terms, they could be understood as what Howell (1988) called *socialized leadership* aspects. The six servant-leader characteristics described by Spears (2002) that can be associated with the feminine aspect of gender are also predominantly needs-focused and other-oriented: listening, empathizing, healing, practicing stewardship (serving the needs of others), exercising commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Reynolds 2011). In van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) model, the five constructs Empowerment, Humility, Standing-Back, Stewardship, and Forgiveness also represented socialized aspects of behavior as opposed to personalized aspects.

Although these observations might support Eicher-Catt's (2005) assertions that, from a gendered perspective, serving is predominantly associated with femininity and leading with masculinity, they need not be associated with the negative aspects associated with gendered notions. For example, Eagly et al. (2003) noted some of the more negative masculine aspects of leadership (in particular transactional leadership) and organizations include hierarchical power structures, coercive power, and focus on competition. Other negative aspects of leadership have been described in charismatic leadership theory. For example, Conger and Kanungo (1998) warned of the dangers associated with the self-centered and manipulative nature of charismatic leadership. Other scholars have differentiated between ethical and unethical transformational leaders (see Bass and Steidlmeier 1999; Howell 1988; Howell and Avolio 1992), who consistently differ in terms of socialized versus personalized interests and motivations, respectively. The leader aspects of the servant-leader outlined above—awareness, conceptualization, persuasion, and foresight—may be congruent with a general concept of leadership, but these aspects do not necessarily imply coercive domination and manipulation associated with negative leadership aspects. Indeed, I argue that, when combined with the servant facets of leadership, the leader facets suggest ethical, socialized leadership.

Following this same line of thinking, the more traditionally feminine aspects of servant-leadership also need not be confined to negative connotations. Keshet et al. (2006) noted that the descriptive nature of gendered notions stereotypically views women and behaviors associated with the feminine as weak and submissive. Similar negative connotations of the concept *servant* were outlined by Eicher-Catt (2005). Van Dierendonck (2010) noted that although servant-leadership has some overlap with models of self-sacrificing leadership, he also asserted that self-determination is an essential



condition of servant-leader behavior. He argued that a self-determined leader does not seek power for its own sake and as a result has a stronger capacity to distribute personal resources in a healthy manner. In this way, self-sacrifice is not sacrifice or self-denial at all. Servant-leaders, through the capacity to fulfill their own basic psychological needs and by virtue of the lack of self-centeredness and desire to dominate (van Dierendonck), are willing and able to forgo the typically ostentatious rewards of power and position. In addition, servant-leader aspects of Accountability, Stewardship, and Empowerment (as described by van Dierendonck 2010 and van Dierendonck and Nuijten 2011) contradict the claim that serving in servant-leadership could be associated with placating or self-degrading connotations of coerced subservience.

Based on previous arguments about behaviors traditionally associated with female socialization, it would follow that listening, empathizing, and empowering others might be considered signs of weakness in a leader. Whether or not these arguably traditionally feminine aspects of servant-leadership are considered passive or active, signs of weakness or of strength, appears to be unimportant considering the power of gender role congruity. Eagly and Karau (2002) reported that the consequences of perceived incongruity with gender roles in the leadership context cause women to be evaluated less favorably as leaders and as potential leaders in general. Few would argue that the feminine characteristics of servant-leadership are undesirable behaviors in either women or men. Indeed, Johanson (2008) reported that male leaders could integrate feminine behaviors into their leadership. Apparently, men can integrate positive feminine behaviors without violating gender role congruity. Nevertheless, evidence of constraints imposed on women as leaders, as posited by gender role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau 2002) and critical skepticism over the potential and effectiveness of servant-leadership in the business environment (Johnson 2008; Showkeir 2002), tend to support the assertion that feminine behavior is negatively perceived in leadership.

In the previous discussion, I outlined arguments supporting my claim that the characteristics distinguishing servant-leadership from other leadership perspectives are traditionally feminine-attributed aspects of the servant-leadership. It follows that servant-leadership adds more feminine-gendered behaviors to the leadership matrix. Although from the feminist deconstruction standpoint represented by Eicher-Catt (2005) this condition of servant-leadership might not be congruent with feminist objectives, I argue that the



servant-leadership perspective can nevertheless serve as a driving force for generating discourse on gender-integrative approaches to organizational leadership. The aspects of servant and leader need not necessarily be loaded with the hierarchical connotations of subjugation and domination. They can also be understood as an integration of common, desirable human behavior and activity.

Women and Feminism in Servant-Leadership Literature

Numerous women have contributed to the body of literature and research on servant-leadership (see the anthologies Spears 1995, 1998; Spears and Lawrence 2002, 2004 for examples of female servant-leader essayists, and Crippen 2004; Dannhauser and Boshoff 2006; Graham 1995; Ngunjiri 2010; Parolini, Patterson, and Winston 2009; Patterson 2004; Russell and Patterson 2004; and Reinke 2004 for examples of female scholars in the field of servant-leadership). Nevertheless, management literature that explicitly discusses women or examines feminist issues through the study of servant-leadership is rare. The contributions in the following examples of Crippen (2004) and Ngunjiri (2010) are worth mentioning in this context.

Crippen (2004) presented a historical narrative inquiry and content analysis of pioneer women in Manitoba, Canada. In her analysis, Crippen pointed out especially how the opportunities for women's leadership were severely constrained in the pioneer era. Such constraints were symptomatic of socially imposed gender hierarchies of the era. Nevertheless, by adopting attitudes and behaviors that are central to servant-leadership, Crippen asserted that these pioneer women were able to exercise great influence on their communities. Ngunjiri (2010) presented a compelling account of black female servant-leaders in her qualitative study of African women leaders. Ngunjiri asserted that by operating within the heterosexual matrix of their socialized subjectivity, African women leaders are able to deconstruct the constraints of oppressive systems. The women in Ngunjiri's study reconstructed their leadership as tempered radicals and critical servant-leaders and used their servant-leader approach to foster social change and pursue social justice.

These contributions represent some groundbreaking qualitative work to include women explicitly in the study of servant-leadership, to discuss women servant-leaders in the context of oppressive conditions, and to construct perspectives of the potential outcomes of servant-leadership in terms



of social change and social justice. Both of these studies exemplify the strength that a servant-leader perspective afforded women in their situated position. The Manitoba pioneer women and the African women leaders also provide examples that meet Parker's (2005) appeal to incorporate resistance to injustice as a dimension of leadership.

Crippen (2004) and Ngunjiri (2010) used feminist frameworks in their studies and as such pioneered feminist analysis in servant-leadership. In their qualitative work, they represented servant-leadership through the experiences of women as a positive force. Their critical feminist voices spoke more to a social criticism of systems that expect women to lead like men or not lead at all. Eicher-Catt (2005), in contrast, voiced a critical feminist deconstruction of servant-leadership that equated servant-leadership with systems of male dominance as opposed to dismantling androcentric concepts of leadership. The following is an in-depth review and discussion of Eicher-Catt's critique.

Critique of Servant-Leadership

Servant-leadership has been criticized on a variety of levels. Some critiques have addressed structural elements of servant-leadership as a leadership theory. For example, Eicher-Catt (2005) claimed servant-leadership lacks a coherent conceptual framework (18). Van Dierendonck (2010) and van Dierendonck and Heeren (2006) echoed this critique, noting that servant-leadership research and conceptualization have lacked an integrated theoretical development (148). In the past, servant-leadership has been criticized for the lack of empirical support (Northouse 2007, 357) to ground servant-leadership in evidence-based research. Indeed, servant-leadership was not originally developed through research-based scholarship. In response to such critique and popular interest, numerous scholars (Barbuto and Wheeler 2006; Laub 1999; Liden et al. 2008; Page and Wong 2000; Patterson 2004; van Dierendonck 2010) in recent years have made efforts to advance the conceptualization and operationalization of servant-leadership into theoretical models, research models, and instruments. Greenleaf's leadership perspective has been broadly integrated into empirical leadership research (van Dierendonck 2010) and in scholarly dialogue on ethics in leadership (Patterson 2008). Nevertheless, as Johnson (2008) pointed out, servant-leadership continues to be met with cynicism (179) in terms of practical application.



Despite the increasing interest in servant-leadership research models, instruments, and empirical studies, only a handful of peer-reviewed articles have made gender a central category of analysis (Barbuto and Gifford 2010; Oner 2009), studied women in servant-leadership (Crippen 2004; Ngunjiri 2010), or have adopted a feminist perspective (Eicher-Catt 2005). For my discussion of critical analysis concerning servant-leadership, I would like to focus on feminist criticism of servant-leadership. Eicher-Catt's (2005) deconstruction of servant-leadership addressed substantive and normative flaws from a feminist perspective. In the next section, I review the deconstruction feminist perspective that servant-leadership is perpetuating structures of gender domination. Then I offer the suggestion that, from a different feminist perspective, servant-leadership can be conceptualized as a gender-integrative approach. By offering this different perspective, this study provides a foundation for addressing the normative and contextual factors of leadership that continue to hinder women's rise to equitable representation in the executive ranks of business and moving both women and men beyond existing categories to integrative thinking.

Feminist Deconstruction of Servant-Leadership

The purpose of deconstruction is primarily to reveal otherwise obscure meaning in language and behavior as driven by implicit, unobtrusive power dynamics (Billing and Alvesson 2000; Kark 2007). In this spirit, Eicher-Catt (2005) presented a critical feminist deconstruction of servant-leadership. She grounded her main arguments in discursive analysis of the term *servant-leadership* and the rhetorical appeal to pathos in servant-leadership discourse. The following is a summative review of Eicher-Catt's analysis.

The paradox of the servant-leader for the gendered interpretation of Eicher-Catt (2005) lies in the historical assignment of the feminine to *servant* and the masculine to *leader*. Eicher-Catt asserted further that servant-leadership discourse is both deceptively ambiguous and deceptively gender-neutral. Based on instruments of discourse analysis, she claimed that the linking of servant and leader, instead of neutralizing gendered connotations, actually accentuates essentialist notions of gender. In rhetorical terms, she stated that the term *servant-leadership* can be described as a trope or a figurative term, and in this case a mutually constraining term. The ambiguity and perceived innocence of the term, she continued,



leads to language games in which organizational members experience a kind of linguistic anarchy. This assumingly strategically created confusion, Eicher-Catt posited, allows those in power to manipulate the other organizational members. Because discursively the term *leader* is unambiguous in the organizational context, the term *servant* becomes the marked term, or the term that is defined through a dominant or default term. A typical example of this semiotic relationship is found in the terms *man* and *woman*, in which *man* is the generalized default term and *woman* is the marked other that is defined in terms of not-man. Therefore, Eicher-Catt stated, the term *servant-leader* reinforces the one-way relationship characterized by the hierarchical arrangement of domination-submission because the term manifests an either/or logic (19). She claimed leaders must give privilege to one interpretation or the other, since if they were not to privilege one, the rules of the leadership game would change. In her conclusion, Eicher-Catt asserted that the cultural essentialization of masculine and feminine would not allow servant-leadership discourse to be gender-neutral or genderless. The illusion of gender neutrality would actually increase the effect of gender oppression.

Oner (2009) contradicted Eicher-Catt's (2005) assertion, claiming that the gender-integrative character of servant-leadership offered women opportunities for liberation in terms of leadership. Oner (2009) addressed the ideas of gender neutrality versus gendering in servant-leadership through an empirical study in Turkey. She claimed that principles typically associated with servant-leadership such as ethics, service, trust, sense of community, and shared leadership contributed to the gender neutrality of the leadership perspective because they contradict typically masculine aspects of leadership. Oner explained that Turkish society is considered a feminine and hierarchical society in Hofstedian terms (8). In her assessment, the notion of a nurturing *masculine* (paternalism) tended to be negatively interpreted in leadership literature. The results of Oner's (2009) survey of middle management employees in a Turkish business context showed evidence that servant-leadership is, indeed, gendered. Her main assertion stated that servant-leadership is gendered in the sense that servant-leadership is perceived as a blend of feminine and masculine qualities of leadership. In conclusion, Oner postulated that the feminized version of leadership, such as servant-leadership, brings certain aspects of benevolence to the foreground of the leadership phenomenon, which, if practiced actively, could open up the matrix of leadership for women.



The strength in Eicher-Catt's (2005) critique lies primarily in arguments concerning gendered connotations of leadership and of serving. As noted earlier, the concept of *servant* is typically associated with subjugation, whereas the concept of *leader* is associated with domination (Eicher-Catt). Her deconstruction of servant-leadership echoed the arguments and discussion previously presented concerning leadership as a predominantly male-gendered construct. In addition, Eicher-Catt (2005) made salient aspects of servant-leadership that are predominantly female-gendered. These arguments were brought forth previously in feminist and critical analyses of gender differences in leadership. The problem with gendered notions of leadership (and servant-leadership) resides in the largely unquestioned hierarchical value order of female versus male. Despite the new consciousness of feminine behaviors as tolerable if not desirable in leadership (Johanson 2008), behavior typically and traditionally associated with female performativity (Butler 2004) continues to be devalued. Upvaluing the experiences and characteristics of the oppressed by celebrating and advocating their integration into the dominant belief systems and social structures within which the oppression was devised carries with it the danger of perpetuating existing and unquestioned assumptions and systems (Eicher-Catt 2005).

Spears (1998) noted that the paradoxical combining of servant and leader has been criticized often for its connotations. Spears, however, interpreted serving and leading as a complementary, harmonious dualism rather than a hierarchical, dichotomous tension. Greenleaf (2003) acknowledged the mutual constraining nature of servant and leader in his statement, "one cannot serve as one leads" (45). He also spoke to the choice that the servant-leader must make. However, his framing of the choice excluded the possibility that those who lead first cannot serve. Complacency, he argued, prevented those who have the disposition to serve and the capacity to lead, yet still choose not to lead. For Greenleaf, the choice between serving and leading is not a question of when, as implied by Eicher-Catt (2005), but a question of whether and why. The person who is by impulse a servant first and chooses not to take on the leadership role, or who chooses to follow leader-first types, is complacent. A true servant-leader must serve first and make a conscious decision to take on the role and responsibility of leading through serving. If we accept Eicher-Catt's (2005) assertions to be as true as Greenleaf's, then the problem of women being underrepresented in business leadership would be a matter of complacency and the cultural inability to reconcile gendered notions of leadership.



A further strength of Eicher-Catt's (2005) critique is the danger she sees in the normative nature of servant-leadership discourse. She noted that the spiritual and religious ideology of servant-leadership discourse used the rhetorical tool of pathos (emotional appeal). By constructing a sort of evangelical vision of organizational leadership, Eicher-Catt warned of the discursive practices associated with religious doctrine that particularly marginalize women and other groups. She cited feminist theologians who also argued that Judeo-Christian doctrine sustains the condition of male domination: "While on the surface the language [of servant-leadership] appears to promote an innocent ethic of resistance to standardized, perhaps oppressive, leadership practices, it operates by a logic of rhetorical substitution that maintains, or at least can maintain, those oppressive practices. One standardized, prescriptive ethic of leadership is replaced by another" (23). Instead of offering a new vision of leadership with horizontal ideology, Eicher-Catt asserted that servant-leadership discourse merely reproduced a prescriptive, androcentric concept of leadership infused with religious dogma.

Van Dierendonck (2010) outlined numerous similarities servant-leadership shares with theories of ethical leadership. Hamilton and Bean (2005) also noted that servant-leadership is viewed as a normative leadership ethic. Because of Greenleaf's background (Greenleaf was a white, U.S. American male, devoutly Christian Quaker, corporate business executive) it is easy to interpret servant-leadership as a vehicle of Western, Christian, capitalistic, hegemonic discourses. Without explicitly managing the meaning of Greenleaf's religious references to Christian stories, confusion may arise. Hamilton and Bean (2005), for example, described the dilemma of transporting servant-leadership for leadership development at a British subsidiary of Synovus Financial Corporation and the necessity to manage meaning in context. Synovus's British colleagues were confused about the religious undertones in servant-leader literature, as a recent law in Great Britain had restricted the expression of religion in the workplace (Hamilton and Bean). In a public, business-related context, associating leadership discourse with Christian doctrine devalues its potential (Reynolds 2011). From a perspective of critical theory, it is not unusual to assume that servant-leadership perpetuates patriarchal religious norms. In a pluralistic society such as the U.S. and in an increasingly globalized community, normative leadership perspectives may well be advised to maintain a secular stance. Proponents of servant-leadership therefore must be equipped to manage normative meaning across cultural contexts.



The deconstruction of servant-leadership makes clear that servant-leadership, as a leadership perspective, philosophy, or ethic, is vulnerable to abuse, as is any ethical guideline, leadership model, or power relationship. In this way, feminist theory offers a lens to question and revise cultural assumptions while revealing the unethical nature of the gendering of power (Kark 2004; Kark 2007). Romanticizing Greenleaf and servant-leadership is as dangerous as romanticizing any leader or leadership model. Deconstruction feminist interpretations of leadership and servant-leadership warn of mixed messages and gender blindness in the language of servant-leadership discourse.

CONCLUSION

While one can hardly claim that servant-leadership was borne of feminist theorizing, some of its foundational concepts are compatible with feminist theory. Despite the fact that his writing lacked mastery of feminist discourse and purposeful intention of addressing gender or feminist issues, Greenleaf's vision of servant-leadership included values that are compatible with feminism. Transformational leadership, as described in the preceding sections, suggests a hierarchy of organizational priorities over human needs and a hierarchy of moral reasoning to be imposed on organizational members. Feminist perspectives of leadership point out hierarchies of gender, power, and hegemonic discourses that perpetuate gender performativity in the context of leadership in organizations. The questions remain: Who decides what the organizational needs are? What counts as ethical? Who decides what behaviors are acceptable for women or men and what effective leadership is? Servant-leadership espouses a nonhierarchical, participative approach to defining organizational objectives and ethics that recognizes and values the subjectivity and situatedness of organizational members. Feminist critique and a gender perspective can also inform servant-leadership through the appeal to integrate the female experience with male experience, subordinated experience with dominant experience. A paradigm shift in leadership theory driven by a paradigm shift of gender values could move organizations from models of hierarchy-driven, rules-based models of dominance and authoritativeness to more holistic, value-driven, follower-oriented and participative models. Further scholarly interpretation from various spiritual worldviews, philosophical paradigms, and interpretive perspectives—such as feminism—can continue to extend Greenleaf's vision as a vehicle for advancing social



change and social justice agendas in contemporary and future organizational life. Feminist theories, no matter which strain of feminism they may espouse, have the potential to further enrich theoretical development, research agendas, and political agendas in leadership and servant-leadership.

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