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Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Servant Leadership

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Beginning in a formal way with the work of Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970s, the study of servant leadership has gradually moved from theoretical discussions, to model development, to initial empirical research. With an emphasis on service, and a commitment to follower-orientation on the part of leaders, servant leadership holds great promise for meeting the unique leadership challenges facing our global communities. These challenges, some of which were evidenced by the fall of our global markets in 2008 and 2009, remind us once again that the health of our organizations and societies is increasingly interdependent on the health of other individuals, organizations, and global communities.

While our world has been rich with cross-cultural diversity down through the ages, the rise of globalization raises our awareness of this diversity. Spurred on by twentieth-century advances in technology – aviation, communication, and especially the quantum leaps in late twentieth-century Internet communication – the cultures of our world have been brought into closer contact than ever.

Engaging cross-cultural perspectives on servant leadership is inherently a valuable exercise, globalization notwithstanding. However, our increased global interdependency of cultures highlights the importance of this topic. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) argue that, 'To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behaviour as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures' (p. 416). While such cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of leaders may occur through a variety of leaders and leadership styles or philosophies, servant leadership – with a focus on the needs of followers – provides a platform upon which the unique cultural perspectives of leaders and followers may be considered.

While the study of servant leadership has gradually moved from theoretical discussions, to model development, to initial empirical research, most of this work has been done in North American and European contexts. Thankfully, there is a small but growing literature base focused on servant leadership in broader global and cross-cultural settings. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of this current theoretical and empirical work, and then explore its potential directions.

Cultural perspectives on servant leadership

In order to furnish an overview of this literature, in this chapter I will provide a general summary of these works around the following categories:

- African perspectives
- Asian perspectives
- Latin American perspectives
- Eastern European perspectives
- ethnically diverse North American perspectives
- perspectives from other global contexts.

African perspectives

Significant research-based and theoretical treatments of servant leadership in the African context have emerged in recent years. Representing this treatment, Kumuyi (2007) argues that 'what Africa needs for its redemption is servant leadership instead of the self-serving governance that the continent is famed for' (p. 18). While historically self-serving approaches to leadership are not limited to the African context, Kumuyi is arguing that Africa finds itself at a unique time in history – a time in which servant leadership practices may be critical for ongoing continental health and stability. While Kumuyi's reflections are largely theoretical and persuasively oriented, they are complemented by a growing set of research-based reflections.

West Africa

In an important study exploring the servant leadership experience of Ghanaian and US followers, Hale and Fields (2007) provide an examination of these followers around three servant leadership dimensions – service, humility, and vision – and the extent to which these followers related servant leadership dimensions to judgements about leadership

effectiveness in each culture. Among the key findings of this study, Hale and Fields found that:

- Ghanaian followers reported experiencing servant leadership behaviours significantly less than North Americans
- the servant leadership dimension of vision had a significantly stronger relationship with leader effectiveness for Ghanaians in comparison with North Americans
- both Ghanaian and US followers relate service and humility with leader effectiveness in a similar manner.

Related to the first finding, Hale and Fields suggest that this may be associated with the higher levels of power distance and in-group collectivism within the Ghanaian culture when compared with US cultural expectations of leadership. These higher levels in Ghanaian culture are supported by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) studies (House *et al.*, 2004) in West Africa.

Okafor-Dike (2008) conducted an exploratory study of the relationship between presidential leadership and economic development in the West African context of Nigeria. The study attempted to identify how presidential leadership characteristics contribute to Nigeria's ongoing status as a developing country with the World Bank. In short, the study focused on how the presidents' leadership impacted the economic growth or decline of the nation from 1960–2004. Examining several leadership styles – including servant leadership – against economic growth indicators, Okafor-Dike concluded that inadequate leadership contributed to the lack of sustained economic growth, and ineffective leadership was more significant in the lack of economic development than resource availability.

East Africa

Moving eastward, we come to two studies focused on one of the most influential countries of East Africa – Kenya. Koshal's (2005) study was focused on extending Patterson's (2003) servant leadership theory by exploring the acceptability and applicability of the constructs within a Kenyan context. Utilizing data from extended interviews with 25 participants, Koshal identified seven prevailing themes reminiscent of the construct of service within Patterson's servant leadership theory. Koshal noted that the construct of service was seen as both acceptable and applicable among Kenyan leaders and managers across the various organizational settings included in the study – government, business corporations, NGOs, and academic institutions.

Next, Ngunjiri (2006) engaged the topic of tempered radicals and servant leadership within a Kenyan context by building upon Alston's (2005) work on the same topic with another population. Alston and Ngunjiri note that tempered radicals are those individuals who are willing to challenge organizational norms while at the same time remaining committed to working within, rather than outside, the organization. Motivated by the limited number of studies on leadership by African women, Ngunjiri sought to understand women's leadership by studying the lived experience of 16 women leaders in the context of Nairobi, Kenya. In this study, Ngunjiri identified the following variables as critically important in their stories and success as leaders: African spirituality, tempered radicalism, and servant leadership.

Also within the East African region, Irving (2007) studied the reliability of Dennis's (2004) Servant Leadership Assessment Instrument (*Instrument d'Evaluation du Serviteur Dirigeant*) among French-speaking Rwandans, and contrasted the results in similar studies conducted in Peru (with a Spanish translation of Dennis's instrument) and the USA. Conducted on site in Rwanda, the findings of this study were presented at the Ninth Annual International Leadership Association meetings along with reflections on pre- and post-genocidal leadership within the context of post-colonial Rwandan history. While the reliability coefficients for the love, empowerment, and vision scales were strong in all three contexts (Rwanda, Peru, and the USA), the reliability coefficients for the humility scale were lower in the French Rwandan (0.5871) and Spanish Peruvian (0.4987) contexts, and higher in the English US context (0.9202). Discussions around societal, cultural, and linguistic perceptions of humility followed.

South Africa

We begin a look at South Africa with Cerff's (2004) conceptual study of servant leadership in which the African concept of Ubuntu is studied in light of the African Renaissance and the South African context. Cerff argues that the unique concepts of Ubuntu and African Renaissance provide promising insights regarding the application of servant leadership theory – this particularly in light of historic experiences of slavery and colonialism in the African context.

Dannhauser and Boshoff (2006) of the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa addressed the relationships between demographic variables, servant leadership, trust, and team commitment in their empirical research. In this work, these constructs were measured among a group of sales persons ($n = 417$) in the automobile industry. In their analysis

(including Pearson product moment correlation, multiple regression, t-tests, and ANOVA), strong and significant relationships were found between servant leadership, trust, and team commitment.

Finally, in Ramsey's (2006) fascinating study focused on the lives of six South African perpetrators, the themes of servant leadership and unconditional forgiveness were studied in the South African context. Through this study of six political perpetrators who applied for and received amnesty after the apartheid era, Ramsey explores how former South African president Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu modelled servant leadership in their negotiating a restorative justice approach through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process of dealing with the atrocities of the apartheid struggle.

As the data from the study was analyzed utilizing phenomenological methods, five primary themes emerged:

- violence harms both victim and perpetrator
- denial and arrogance are used to protect the perpetrator from shame
- empathy creates an environment whereby the perpetrator can ask for and receive forgiveness
- the gift of forgiveness increases the ability to forgive oneself
- forgiveness is a bridge to the future.

One of the more striking accounts of the story is the great lengths victim families went through to show restorative and unconditional love and forgiveness to perpetrators. Ramsey (2006) makes the connection of this radical forgiveness with Greenleaf's description of servant leaders' commitments to serving the good of others and their holistic development.

Latin-American perspectives

Spanish speaking

While only in its initial stages, the research on servant leadership in Latin America includes reflections from both Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries. We begin with Serrano's (2006) treatment of servant leadership in the Panamanian context. Focused on Patterson's (2003) theory of servant leadership, Serrano examined the viability and acceptance of the theory's constructs within Panama. Serrano found that Patterson's servant leadership constructs were conceptually acceptable and considered as good leadership practices within the culture, and also that there was wide practical application of the constructs evidenced

throughout the culture. Furthermore, while the research did not specifically study enactment of the constructs, it did identify both inhibiting conditions as well as conditions conducive for the application of servant leadership constructs. Serrano concluded with two important implications. First, empowerment must be understood appropriately; second, participants identified political leaders as most in need of the servant leadership construct.

Next, we highlight Anderson's (2006) exploration of barriers that impede the effective implementation of servant leadership in Latin America. Anderson identified that many members in this study agreed with the notion of servant leadership, but the number of leaders actually practising it is significantly wanting within the study's Christian Latin American organizations. Utilizing a grounded theory method, Anderson identified ten primary barriers and three central strategies for overcoming these servant leadership barriers.

Also exploring hindrances to, as well as the value of, servant leadership practice in Latin America, Irving and McIntosh (2009) present their initial findings based on their research in a Peruvian context. The authors found a pattern of overall participant affirmation of the concept of servant leadership, evidenced by such participant statements as, 'In order to be a leader one must first become a servant.' Alongside such affirmation, participants also raised questions about whether or not servant leadership principles will be effective in their unique cultural context. Irving and McIntosh highlight four probable causes to this cultural questioning of servant leadership's efficacy:

- the high power–distance nature of Latin America
- the hierarchical nature of the dominant religious movement in the region
- the semantic confusion between *servant* and *slave* in the language of servant leadership
- cultural emphases such as personalism, particularism, and paternalism.

In another article (Irving and McIntosh, 2007), the authors evaluate the reliability of the *Evaluación Organizacional de Liderazgo* (EOL; a Spanish translation of Laub's (1999) Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA)) among Spanish speaking Latin Americans. In order to further the servant leadership research agenda in cross-cultural contexts, Irving and McIntosh provide an exploratory examination of the EOL's reliability with Peruvian participants. The reliability coefficient for the EOL in this study was 0.9862. This finding is consistent with the alpha

coefficient found in other studies using the English version of the OLA (Laub, 1999 [0.98]; Ledbetter, 2003 [0.9814]; Irving, 2005 [0.9713]).

In another Latin American speaking study, McIntosh and Irving (2010) provide an evaluation of the *Instrumento de Contribución al Liderazgo de Siervo* (ICLS; a Spanish translation of Dennis's (2004) Servant Leadership Assessment Instrument) for reliability in Latin America. Research in Lima, Peru demonstrated that the translated instrument was reliable in three of its scales – love (0.8373), empowerment (0.9167), and vision (0.9047), paving the way for increased servant leadership study in that country and other parts of Latin America. The instrument had a lower reliability rating in its humility scale (0.4987); the authors suggest that this finding may be associated with culturally established patterns of leadership in the Latin American context of Peru.

While not specifically focused on servant leadership, McIntosh's (2007) research on Peruvian leadership definitions and practices highlights findings relevant to the study of servant leadership within the Latin American context. Among other things, McIntosh's research demonstrated that Peruvians were anxious to experience new models of leadership, having tired of the authoritarian or *caudillo* model that is dominant in the region. Participants in McIntosh's study indicated that effective leaders need to be characterized by:

- living a life of integrity
- serving others
- leadership that encourages maximum participation from teams that will support the leader's ability to motivate, persuade, and build trust.

I conclude this section with two additional works. First, in a theoretical piece engaging neoliberalism in Latin America, Moreton (2007) examines how economic reforms have moved Latin America towards a state of neoliberalism, and connects these concepts with a reconnection to the biblical past, servant leadership, and service economy. The second piece is an original work engaging the topic of servant leadership from a Puerto Rican perspective. Writing to Latin American Christians, Batista (1998) notes in this work that leader motives may be a significant obstacle in following key Christian principles, and goes on to engage the problem of leaders who practise their leadership in a manner that is inconsistent with their beliefs and values. While not a researcher-based work, Batista provides a key original work in Spanish that engages the concept of servant leadership from a Christian perspective.

Portuguese speaking

Moving to a second language group in Latin America, there are two significant projects focused on servant leadership within the context of Portuguese-speaking Latin America. First, Amaral (2007) studied the application of servant leadership theory among Brazilian church leaders. After an examination of servant leadership theory and an evaluation of its relevancy and applicability to Evangelical Brazilian church leaders, Amaral developed a course for them and then utilized a pre-test and post-test survey, with interviews and observations, to evaluate course emphases and shifts in leadership practice. Amaral included the following servant leadership emphases in the course: leadership focus, influence, character, and heart. While some participants viewed the model and emphases as a utopian form of leadership, most saw these as being consistent with their biblical roots in the model of Jesus Christ. When evaluated six months after the course, most leaders believed their leadership style had changed, but that their leadership influence had declined due to servant leadership practices not meeting the cultural expectations of followers for more authoritarian forms of leadership. Overall, participants demonstrated that the servant leadership model had a significant impact on their personal lives and affected their lay leaders as well.

In the second Brazilian piece, Marinho (2005) engages servant leadership in the country's changing culture. Marinho identifies a tension between servant leadership's 'incontestable appeal' (p. 115) in the Brazilian corporate environment and the culture's ambivalence over the word 'servant', because 'the concept of *servant* as represented by Biblical and ethical values is not as clear for a Catholic culture as it seems to be for an Evangelical culture', and 'in a Catholic culture there seems to be no clear distinction between the concept of *servant* ... and the concept of *slave*' (pp. 116–17). Due to the 73.8 per cent (2000 census data) dominance of Catholic religiosity in Brazil, Marinho notes that, 'the semantic confusion between the terms *servant* and *slave* in the Brazilian culture presents a significant challenge to engaging in servant leadership as a way of life' (p. 117).

Asian perspectives

Our survey of Asia begins with Moon's (1999) study of servant leadership in Korea. Moon engaged Korean leaders who tended to conceive of biblical servant leadership as weak. Moon demonstrated to them that Jesus Christ was both an example of great service and authentic

spiritual authority, and that Korean church leaders should also see these as working together. With a similar focus, Jeong (2005) utilized the perspectives of various Korean theologians in his study to establish differences between the 'pyramidal' structure, servant leadership, and servant-oriented structures. Addressing the social changes in Korea, Jeong studied pastoral leadership in light of structural considerations and the role of a community-based church.

In two additional Korean studies, Chung (2004) focused on a biblical model of servant leadership that could be used as a new paradigm for Seventh-day Adventist ministers in Korea, and Han (2006) explored the role of a servant model for pastoral leadership within a Korean American church context. Han addresses, as Moon (1999), the challenge of authority perceptions with Korea's leaders aiming to practise servant leadership, but argues that servant leadership holds a unique advantage in helping Korean Americans as they face the physical and mental stresses of adapting to life in America.

Finally, Hean and Tin (2007) provide a unique Singaporean perspective that addresses servant leadership in Singapore leadership mentoring, and Chen (2002) provides a case study analysis of servant leadership among Taiwanese Mennonite churches. Chen addresses the challenges associated with Chinese views of hierarchical leadership, noting that the concept of 'leader' and 'servant' stand against one another in the Chinese mindset. This study explored related hindrances to servant leadership and provides strategies for its implementation among Taiwanese Mennonite churches.

North America: racially diverse perspectives

Among the growing voices in servant leadership studies are reflections within the US context from or about Black leaders and organizations. Among this literature, Taylor (2006), Williams-Scurlock (2005), Alston (2005), and Berry (2008) provide important reflections. Engaging the importance of servant leadership in a rural African American church, Taylor focused on a training model to equip deacons for servant leadership. Williams-Scurlock investigated how the servant leadership attributes of pioneering, modelling, appreciation of others, empowerment, and vision have been demonstrated within a historically Black fraternity across multiple eras.

Alston (2005) was the basis for Ngunjiri's (2006) previously identified treatment of tempered radicals and servant leadership in Kenya. Alston focused on how this juxtaposition contributed to the persistence of Black female superintendents in their positions despite the many

challenges of serving as a Black female in educational leadership. Also focused on education, Berry (2008) examined three African American female elementary principals who allowed their personal spiritual beliefs to provide a framework for how they lead their urban schools. These individuals were studied in order to better understand how their leadership styles, decision-making habits, and communication practices contributed to environments of academic excellence for children of colour. Of the common characteristics identified between these principals was a demonstrated philosophy of servant leadership.

Other global perspectives

In a significant study involving 3282 respondents from 23 countries, Molnar (2007) conducted a cross-cultural study of national cultural dimensions and servant leadership. Molnar's statistical procedures utilized Hofstede's (2001) cultural typology dimensions and the Servant Leadership Index (SLI), an instrument with which to explore potential relationships between the variables. Centred on the correlative and influential relationships of gender upon the applicability of servant leadership, Molnar argues that servant leadership holds great potential to act as an intellectual and emotional bridge between worldviews.

Dillman's (2004) cross-cultural study examines servant leadership perceptions of Australian and US pastors. Examining perceptions of servant leadership variables consistent with Patterson's (2003) work, Dillman found their understandings to be largely similar, although differences were seen at the implementation level. Also including Australian participants, Sendjaya *et al.* (2008) developed the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale – a 35-item, six-dimensional measure. Their resulting model is a positive extension to existing models, due to its features of service orientation, holistic outlook, and moral-spiritual emphasis.

Representative of Canadian scholars and practitioners, Crippen (2005a, 2005b, 2006) engages servant leadership in the education and history of Manitoba. In History, Crippen (2006) examined how three pioneer women impacted Manitoba through service, leadership, and determination to serve the wider community. In education, Crippen (2005b) identified Greenleaf's 'first to serve, then to lead' concept as being particularly useful for educational leadership (Crippen, 2005b), arguing that servant leadership was applicable to provincial legislation that required an inclusive philosophy of education focused on meeting the needs of each student (Crippen, 2005a).

From the Eastern European context, Dimitrova (2008) investigated the causal relationship between dimensions of Patterson's model with

students enrolled at Sofia University in Bulgaria. Support was found for the causal relationships among the servant leadership constructs with one exception – the relationship between altruism and vision.

Future directions for the study of servant leadership within the global context

Based upon this overview of cross-cultural perspectives on servant leadership, I will provide several observations and directions for future research. First, while the African and Latin American literature sets are the strongest, most of these projects provide research insights that are exploratory and introductory in nature. With the evaluation of some servant leadership instruments in these contexts, and with initial contextual validation of servant leadership constructs, the open doors for research further down the servant leadership research stream are abundant.

Second, in light of culturally embedded views of what constitutes leadership authority in the Asian context, servant leadership researchers and practitioners will need to pay attention to this tendency to associate servant-oriented practice with weakness. Additionally, much of the work in this context has been focused on leadership among religious groups. While helpful, there is need for servant leadership research in the Asian context focused on leadership in other sectors such as business, government, and education.

Third, in light of the great work on cross-culture leadership that has been, and continues to be, undertaken surrounding Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions and the larger GLOBE project (House *et al.*, 2004), servant leadership scholars will find many open doors for research looking at the relationship between servant leadership and cultural dimensions. Additionally, the relationship between servant leadership and culturally endorsed leadership theory dimensions (CLTs) in diverse global communities will also be helpful for advancing our understanding and practice of servant leadership in global contexts. These observations and recommendations for future directions in research only begin to describe the significant opportunities that are available to the research community.

Servant leadership and cross-cultural validity

Perhaps one of the most pressing and practical questions for readers is this: Is servant leadership a valid and viable leadership approach across

cultures? My short answer to this is 'Yes, but not without qualification'. First, while demonstrated as valid through many of the studies reported in this chapter, the literature and research around servant leadership is not yet sufficiently extensive to speak to this question with precision. Second, some of the works reported in this chapter do suggest that contexts associated with high power-distance relationships find the modes of servant leadership to be challenging and, at times, associated with a 'weak' form of leadership that is counter-intuitive to the culturally familiar hierarchical structures. Third, in addition to structural-cultural challenges, there are also cultural-linguistic challenges in some contexts, with the language of services and servant being too closely associated with the language, imagery, and histories of slavery.

Finally, I would argue that the enactment of servant leadership must take on culturally-contingent characteristics to be effective in diverse settings. For instance, the GLOBE studies (House *et al.*, 2004) highlight societal variance around the self-protective, culturally endorsed, implicit leadership theme. In a context where leader self-protective behaviour is associated with effective leadership, a follower-focus (serving the needs of the led over the needs of the leader) will probably appear different than in a context that views leader self-protective behaviour as being the absence of humility and indicative of poor and dictatorial leadership. Such cultural perspectives may be viewed by some as an argument for why servant leadership is not cross-culturally valid. I would argue that this evidences the need for servant leadership theory and practice to be culturally-contingent, adapting to diverse contexts in order to fulfil the heart of a follower-focused and servant-first orientation.

The need for servant-leaders with cosmopolitan and global perspective continues to grow in our day (Patterson *et al.*, 2007; Quist, 2008). The cross-cultural voices on servant leadership highlighted in this chapter provide an encouragement that good work in servant leadership studies is starting to take place in the global context, and demonstrate the great need and opportunity for future research in this area of study that still exists.