The Servant Leadership:

Followership Continuum from a Social Psychology Cognitive Perspective

Maureen M. Nixon
Regent University

Overview of Adult Social cognition is focused on choices that people make based on interaction between the person, other people and the environment, the interpretation they make of these events, and how these events are stored in memory (Andersen & Chen, 2002). “Social cognition is a special form of cognitive psychology, one that deals specifically with the ways in which we think about people and the social aspects of our environment. (Deaux & Wrightsman, 1988, p. 21). Understanding the scope of social cognition is especially relevant to the servant leader-follower model as it explores questions such as, “How do followers of a servant leader interpret the actions of the leader” and, “As the events are stored in memory, how will the accumulation of these servant actions affect the follower”? This chapter will begin by briefly tracing the development of social cognition theory from its roots in cognitive psychology. It is necessary to gain a background in how modern cognitive social psychology theory was shaped because many of the principles appear to have direct impact on this study. The focus of the chapter will be an examination of Bandura’s (1995) social cognitive theory (SCT) for application of the self-efficacy and self-regulation constructs to variables in the servant leadership-followership model, referred to as the continuum.

The Continuum Characteristics Supported by Cognitive Theories

The variables of Patterson’s (2003) servant leader model which include humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment and service have been explored through extensive literature reviews by numerous researchers (Joseph & Winston, 2005; Banutu-Gomez, 2004; Winston, 2003; Patterson, 2003; Patterson & Stone, 2003). However, this chapter examines the continuum developed by Winston (2003) from the perspective of social cognition because many of the model concepts are connected to an individual’s thought processes regarding the action of a servant leader and their interactions with other people. This chapter will apply the constructs of social cognitive theory and provide evidence of support for the following variables of servant leadership: agapao, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and self efficacy.
Figure 1: Winston’s Extended Model of Servant Leadership

Literature Review of Social Cognition

Cervone (1991) defines social cognition as the “cognitive processes and structures (e. g., self-conceptions, standards, goals) through which individuals assign personal meaning to events, plan courses of action, and regulate their motivation, emotions, and interpersonal behavior” (p. 372). Cognition is rooted in the Latin cognoscere, “to become acquainted with or to know”. Psychologists separate cognition (thinking and knowing) from emotion (behavior and feeling). “The work on social cognition is directed at identifying how people process information and at making more precise predictions about the relationship between people and their social world” (Worchel, Cooper, Goethals, & Olson, 2000, p. 11). Two basic issues in cognition, mental representation and mental processing, have been explored in depth by cognitive psychologists (Deaux, Dane, & Wrightsman (1993). In its basic form, a representation is something that stands for something else. A representative in the House of Congress stands for or represents thousands of people in his or her district but is obviously not all of those people. A diploma represents a college education but it is not the education itself. Von Eckardt (n. d.) suggests that viewing the mind/brain as a computer-like device is a foundational assumption and that the mental representations that spring from this assumption are computational structures or states. Mental representation in cognitive psychology resembles building blocks (Landman & Manis, 1983) that create a mental structure rather than a physical one. Building blocks are the set of principles that organize our cognitive experience (Shaw & Costanzo, 1982).

In contrast, mental processing theory is used to examine how these building blocks are organized, stored, and how these blocks affect individual behavior. According to Dail Fields (personal communication, March 29, 2005), “cognitive processing predicts that the follower will see if the leader matches a formerly stored schema or grouping of cognitions”. Schemas are the cognitive frameworks that “guide memory, aide in the interpretation of events, and influence how we later retrieve stored memories” (Flannery & Walles, 2003,
Putting this into the context of servant leadership, Patterson writes that the emphasis in servant leadership is on service with the idea of empowerment and servant leadership working hand-in-hand (Patterson, 2003). Encountering the leadership style of a servant leader who offers to serve and empower them, a follower would search through stored schemas for past experiences that would help the follower determine the motives of the leader. The follower may find stored memories where a leader acted in a similar manner and the follower later discovered manipulation or deception. The follower then attempts to balance the schema against the perceived motives of the servant leader and determine an expected outcome.

Also at work in understanding the relation of schemas to servant leadership is the schema connected to the word “servant”. By definition from the Greek word “doulos”, servant is used as an adjective meaning “in bondage” or as a noun it is frequently used to mean subjection without the idea of bondage (Vine’s Expository Dictionary, n. d.). As Chaleff (1996) points out, most leaders do not think of themselves as followers, much less servants. This creates a built-in conflict in cognitive understanding in the term servant leadership. Schemas will affect the perceptions of the follower in every aspect of leadership as the mind compares experience with current reality. Turning to a Biblical example for clarification, the Jews in the days of Jesus’ ministry questioned his identity as the Messiah. Schemas built from hundreds of years of history showed that rulers conquered by force. Interpretation by priests of the Torah, combined with a history of force, created the belief that the Messiah would come as a King to reign over the earth, to free the Jews from Roman oppression. Matching the teachings and actions of Jesus with Jewish schemas made it difficult to accept that He came as the servant of man, not the conqueror.

In 1986, Bandura narrowed many years of research in various areas of psychology and social psychology into social cognitive theory (SCT). SCT is built upon three categories of determinants: (1) individual cognition and other personal factors, (2) behavior of the individual and, (3) the performance environment (Bandura, 1982). When translated into a leadership theory, the three categories of interaction become leader cognitions, leader behaviors, and the leadership environment (McCormick, 2001). This approach of the interaction of people, the environment and cognitive abilities appears to be an advanced theory built upon Lewin’s field theory of $B = f (P, E)$ where behavior is a function of both the person and their environment. Although Bandura’s relationship model is triadic (people, the environment and cognitive abilities) and reciprocal, the reciprocal influences may not be simultaneous or of equal strength (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Reciprocal influences refers to the fact that each part of the model affects and interacts with the other, but not necessarily with the variables of equal importance or in a simultaneous mode. Wood and Bandura reached the conclusion that people are “both products and producers of their environment” (p. 362). The social cognitive perspective of the individual exercising control over thoughts and actions in interaction with the environment led Bandura to conclude that the beliefs that people hold about their own capabilities can be a predictor and determinant of behavior (Pajares & Schunk, 2001).

**Linking Social Cognitive Theory to Characteristics of the Continuum**

**Self Efficacy**

According to Stajkovic and Luthans (1998), Bandura’s SCT offers advances in both the fields of psychology and organizational behavior in unlocking human potential through (1) a broad, comprehensive scope beyond behaviorism and social learning; (2) a change in the view of learning to “knowledge acquisition through cognitive processing of information” (p. 63); and, (3) expansion of the concept of self-efficacy. Self efficacy is noted as the “central integrative variable” (McCormick, 2001, p. 22). Self efficacy is differentiated from self-confidence by McCormick and Martinko’s (2004) examination of leader social cognitions: self-confidence is a stable, trait characteristic; and, self efficacy is “malleable, capable of being changed given the right conditions” (p. 6). Perceived self efficacy is defined as “people’s beliefs in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over events in their lives” (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 364). Self-efficacy is task or role specific; self confidence is general in nature (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). The role of self-efficacy in promoting success in leadership experiences has been extensively examined (Wood & Bandura, 1989; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Harrison, Rainer, Hockwarter, & Thompson, 1997; Paglis & Green, 2002; van Knippenberg, van Kippenberg, Cremer, & Hogg, 2004; McCormick & Martinko, 2004). A lengthy analysis of self-efficacy by Gist and Mitchell (1992) concludes that self-efficacy is a critical motivational component as it influences “individual choices, goals, emotional reactions, effort, coping, and persistence” (p. 186). Paglis and Green (2002) suggest that self-efficacy is one of
the defining constructs in whether a manager is motivated to initiate change. Houghton, Neck and Manz (2003) point to self-efficacy as one of the sustaining performance factors in teams due to the belief amongst the individuals that their abilities will carry them to task completion. Since the development of self-efficacy is largely a process impacted by cognitive processing of experience and behavior, social cognitive theory offers a new platform for examining the continuum by focusing on follower self-efficacy, self regulation and the impact of self-efficacy and self regulation on various variables in the model.

Figure 2: Winston’s extended model of servant leadership-followership highlighting areas impacted by social cognitive theory

Self-efficacy appears in Winston’s continuum as a follower attribute arising from the follower’s agapao that has been influenced by any or all variables of the servant leader continuum. The question immediately arises, “Can a leader bestow self-efficacy on a follower”? Absolutely not, but a servant leader can set the stage for the development of self-efficacy in followers through four main forms of influence: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and the creation of positive physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 1995). Mastery experiences are the obstacles in life that an individual encounters and overcomes through resilience and perseverance. It is the repetition of successful mastery experiences that contribute to increased self efficacy. Bandura (1995) states, “Developing a sense of efficacy through mastery experiences is not a matter of adopting ready-made habits. Rather, it involves acquiring the cognitive, behavioral, and self-regulatory tools for creating and executing appropriate courses of action to manage ever-changing life circumstances” (p. 3). Cognitive schema are components of building self efficacy in mastery experiences as a follower not only searches for past successes of their own as building blocks, but may question the motives of the leader in assigning certain tasks. Followers may discuss the leader’s actions with other followers, influencing or being influenced by the social interaction to form opinions of the motives of the servant leader. Placing a mastery experience in the continuum, the role of the servant leader would be to establish a vision of the follower’s role in the organization (Patterson, 2003), show trust in the follower or provide the follower with a chance to earn trust, which in turn leads to empowerment. Jesus exemplified this step-by-step process when
he proclaimed to Peter that He would use Peter as the foundation of the church. Even after Peter’s three
denials of Christ, Jesus’ vision of Peter’s role did not change and Peter grew to earn that trust, resulting in his
empowerment as one of the lead disciples in establishing the church. Mastery experiences do not mean that
the leader steps in to rescue a follower whenever the assignment is difficult, but rather establishing a sense
that the leader fully believes that the follower can accomplish the task. The servant leader also must offer their
service when needed either in the form of actual production or making the correct resources available.

A servant leader will also employ vicarious experiences (modeling of effective skills) to help a follower
attain or increase self-efficacy. Wood and Bandura (1989) suggest that modeling impacts self efficacy via a
social comparison process. Successful models may raise follower’s expectations of their own abilities and
conversely, watching others fail after concerted effort may lower their judgments of their own abilities (Wood &
Bandura). The follower’s cognitive processing of these influences will determine their effectiveness (Bandura,
1995). In a study comparing the conceptual similarities of transformational and servant leadership theories,
Smith, Montagno and Kuzmenko (2004) support the need for modeling in the development of followers.
Because many followers have been subjected to poor forms of leadership, modeling is crucial to servant
leadership today, just as it was to the early Christian church. Paul’s message to the Thessalonians emphasized
that despite suffering, the Thessalonians welcomed the message of Christ. “And so you became a model to all
the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 The 1: 7, NIV). Modeling also reinforces the leader’s verbal
commitment to serving the follower. A leader who tells an employee that they trust them to make decisions, yet
is highly critical when a decision does not produce the desired results, reinforces negative schemas existing
in the follower’s cognition. A leader who states, “I trust you to make the right decision” and then upholds the
decision of the follower models what he or she espouses.

Social persuasion (positive appraisal and realistic encouragement), the third form of influence in raising self-efficacy, involves more than positive feedback. A key phrase in Wood and Bandura’s (1989)
application of SCT in organizational management relative to social persuasion “…success should be measured
in terms of self-improvement, rather than through triumphs over others” (p. 365) embraces the whole concept
of the continuum. It directly points to the altruism aspect of the continuum as the leader may offer positive
appraisal for the benefit to the individual follower, even at potential costs to the leader (Patterson, 2003).
Although helping a follower improve self-efficacy through social persuasion is done by the leader for the benefit
of the follower, self-efficacy of the follower in turn benefits the organization because it is task related
(Schwoerer, May, Hollensbe, & Mencel, 2005). “Self-efficacy...has been found to be a robust predictor of
learning in training and performance in a wide range of situations” (Schwoerer, et al., p. 112). Social
persuasion is also linked to vision in this portion of SCT as Patterson (2003) cites Wis, “A servant leader who is
visionary senses the unknowable; the follower’s potential and is able to help followers see the same thing,
within the bigger picture (p. 6). The servant leader’s ability to communicate vision and the follower’s place in
the vision through realistic encouragement may positively affect efficacy. Often the mission may seem
impossible to followers but the leader can make the vision clear and seemingly attainable. Regent University’s
mission of adding 250,000 undergraduate students sounds like the “impossible dream”, yet at a recent chapel
service, Dr. Pat Robertson gave an overview of what had already been accomplished and the dream began to
take on the distinct shape of possibility. His steadfast belief in the vision communicated to the followers their
role in this mission and strengthened self-efficacy in the task.

Finally, physiological and emotional states are used by individuals to determine their capabilities.
Again, this is based in the social psychology perspective that it is not just the intensity of the reaction but the
perception and interpretation by the follower (Bandura, 1995).

Bandura (1995) points out that human functioning is regulated through cognitive, motivational,
affective, and selection processes. The cognitive aspect will be key in decision making, regulated by the
individual’s self-appraisal of capabilities. The primary motivational thrust through which followers are
influenced arises from the enhancement of follower self-efficacy and self-worth (House & Shamir, 1993). Yukl
(1998) suggests that followers begin to trust the leader once their self-efficacy is established or enhanced by
the leader which results in increased commitment to both leader and organization. Critically related to
supporting the role of self-efficacy in creating trust through the social psychology perspective is the concept
that in the context of the evolution of trust, two or more parties are involved in creating a joint definition of the
social situation. Each party brings its own set of interpretive schemes to the social situation. To the extent that
they use or develop similar interpretive schemes to define the social situation, the parties will tend to agree on their perceptions of the level of trust present in the social situation...The likely nature of this adjustment depends on the degree of congruence or similarity between the values, attitudes...of the two parties (Jones & George, 1998, p. 535).

**Self-Regulation**

In SCT, the area of self-regulation brings additional insight into the Winston (2003) continuum. Self-regulation of thought, action, emotion and motivation is one of the central aspects of SCT and is defined as a process used by individuals to control and direct personal actions (McCormick and Martinko, 2004). Self-regulation motivates and regulates the behavior of individuals through three principal subfunctions: “self monitoring of one’s behavior, its determinants, and its effects; judgment of one’s behavior in relation to personal standards and environmental circumstances; and affective self-reaction” (Bandura, 1991, p. 248). Bandura points out that people do not operate as weathervanes, influenced by the shifting winds of the environment, but as beings with self-reflective and self-reactive capabilities.

The three subfunctions are critical to examining agapao love, the cornerstone of the continuum. Agapao love, the Greek term for moral love, is defined by Winston (2002) as doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason. As Patterson (2002) further explains, “The leader that leads with agapao love has a focus on the employee first, then on the talents of the employee, and lastly on how this benefits the organization (p. 3). For a servant leader, “it is not enough to be honest and just and demand that we be treated honestly and justly by others. We must learn to love honest and justice for themselves, not just for their effect on personal circumstances, but for their effect....on the progress of humanity....(McCain & Salter, 2004, pp 106-107.) To lead with agapao love, a leader must engage in self- regulation of behavior, determinants and effects. Both servant leaders and servant followers must engage in self-observation of their “thought patterns, emotional reactions, and behavior and the conditions under which these reactions occur” (Bandura, 1991, p. 250) in order to identify recurrent patterns. This aspect of self-regulation assists in judging one’s own behavior by examining congruence of thought, behavior and environmental conditions.

**Future Research**

Most of the empirical research on self efficacy has either been conducted in labs or conducted with students (Harrison, et al.,1997). The research has also frequently been associated with situations not related to organizations such as Bandura’s (1986) original test of the self efficacy model with phobias regarding snakes. None of the research appears to have directly tested the effect of self-efficacy on the continuum variables. For example, the effect of trust has been widely measured but little research exists on trust and its connection to self-efficacy. McCormick and Martinko’s (2004) social cognitive model of group leadership also has potential for further exploration of social cognition factors potentially impacting servant leaders and servant followers. Additionally, empirical evidence on servant leadership is non-existent (Russell & Stone, 2002). Instruments available for measuring and validating servant leadership are also limited because the topic is relatively new. This poses problems but also affords opportunities for developing or testing instruments and in turn the constructs of the continuum. Empirical research will open the door to variables to be added to or removed from the model which may change the role of self-efficacy in supporting the continuum.

**Conclusion**

This paper offers an initial step in examining the continuum from the perspective of social cognition. Even though a substantial body of literature has been written about servant leadership, none of the work appears to have approached the continuum from a social cognition focus. The cognitive theories of social psychology offer researchers a framework for examining how the actions of a servant leader are interpreted by the followers. Social cognition also provides the lens of gaining understanding as to how the follower’s schemas affect their reaction to a servant leader. Although Bandura’s social cognitive theory does not support every facet of the continuum, SCT offers new insights and varying degrees of support for the servant leader-follower variables of agapao, vision, trust, empowerment, and altruism. SCT clearly illustrates the importance of a leader providing opportunity for building self-efficacy among followers and the resulting support of self-efficacy for the continuum.
References:


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