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A STATE OF CONFUSION OR DEVELOPMENT? A META-ANALYSIS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN JBPL ARTICLES

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The *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* (JBPL) promotes the research and exploration of leadership-related topics through the lens of Hebrew and Christian scriptures, serving as a crossroads for both scholarly leadership and theological thinking and learning. Servant Leadership is one of the theories routinely mentioned in the journal, but the description and characteristics of the theory seem to differ slightly, article to article. Why? This paper employs a meta-analytic process to assess the articles in the JBPL to determine what patterns emerge on Servant Leadership. The results yield confusing patterns, indicating the ongoing state of development in the theory. The article offers several recommendations for preparing and evaluating future Servant Leadership-related JBPL articles, to include: (a) maintaining awareness of related, ongoing research and publications, (b) reviewing and incorporating the most current research when publishing Servant Leadership-related material, (c) aiming for specificity, recognizing the theory's state of development, and providing clarity by associating references to a published Servant Leadership model/description, (d) developing and refining Servant Leadership theory by building upon the growing body of knowledge in this area of study, and finally (e) being specific when benchmarking leader performance with Servant Leadership theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hosted by Regent University and published annually, the *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* (JBPL) promotes the research and exploration of leadership-related topics through the lens of Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It serves as a crossroads for both scholarly leadership and theological thinking and learning, so the articles have great potential to influence travelers on the pathway during their

leadership- and spiritual-development journeys. Servant Leadership is one of the theories routinely mentioned in the journal, but the description and characteristics of the theory seem to differ slightly, author to author; therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze articles in the JBPL that discussed the relationship between published Servant Leadership dimensions and Biblical scripture. The main research question that guided the analysis was: *What patterns emerge from the JBPL on Servant Leadership?*

II. METHOD

This meta-analysis of emerging patterns on Servant Leadership in the JBPL followed the format described in Timulak and Creaner (2013). Its purpose aimed at studying the utilization and application of the dimensions of Servant Leadership theory more thoroughly. According to Schreiber, Crooks, and Stern (1997), a qualitative meta-analysis focuses on aggregating “a group of studies for the purposes of discovering the essential elements and translating the results into an end product that transforms the original results into a new conceptualization” (as cited in Timulak, 2009, p. 133). The resulting conceptualization serves to inform recommendations for the future steps in methodology, research concentration, and approaches in this area of leadership study.

Selection of Articles

Twenty-nine (37%) of the 77 published articles in the JBPL explicitly mention the term Servant Leadership at least once; however, for an article to be included in the meta-analysis, it had to have an adequate depth of related information and more than just a passing reference to Servant Leadership. Table 1 provides an overview of the articles initially considered for selection based on some mention of Servant Leadership.

Thirteen of the 29 JBPL articles that mentioned Servant Leadership only did so briefly or presented a very limited discussion on the theory; therefore, they were quickly eliminated from the primary list for analysis. These included: Ayers (2006), Gary (2007), Palmer (2007), Niewold (2008), Massey (2009), Bekker (2009), Tangen (2010), Tucker (2010), Huizing (2011), Mckinney (2013), Bower (2013), Thomas (2014), and West (2014). Two articles (Burchard, 2012; Huizing, 2012) served as literature reviews of the journal and did not provide new information related to Servant Leadership, so they were eliminated from the primary list.

Finally, six articles, while mentioning Servant Leadership in more detail, only provided limited discussion on a specific model, the servant leadership dimensions, or any associated scripture, so they were also eliminated from consideration. These included: Poon (2006), Gyertson (2006), Niewold (2007), Crowther (2011), Wilson (2011), and King (2013). From the original pool of 29 articles that explicitly mentioned Servant Leadership, 13 were eliminated quickly for limited focus; two literature reviews were eliminated, and six articles that lacked sufficient depth were eliminated. Therefore, the remaining eight (10% of the JBPL) served as the primary articles for this meta-analysis.

Table 1

Summary of JBPL for 2006-2014 discussing Servant Leadership (SL)

Author(s)	SL Model(s)	Number of SL Dimensions	Scripture Reference	SL Depth?	Use of SL Theory
Volume 1, Issue 1					
Ayers (2006)	Greenleaf (1977)	0		No	
Poon (2006)	Patterson (2003)	1		Yes	(limited)
Gyertson (2006)	Greenleaf (1977)	0	Philippians 2	Yes	(limited)
Volume 1, Issue 2					
Gary (2007)	Greenleaf (1977); Patterson (2003)	0 0		No	
Niewold (2007)	Greenleaf (1977)	0		Yes	(limited)
Palmer (2007)		1		No	
Volume 2, Issue 1					
Hardgrove (2008)	Russell and Stone (2002); Page and Wong (2000); Patterson (2003)	9 12 7	Philippians 2	Yes	Benchmark
Niewold (2008)		0		No	
Volume 2, Issue 2					
Akinyele (2009)	Greenleaf (1977); Patterson (2003); Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2004)	0 7 1	Ester 4, 5, 8	Yes	Benchmark
Buford (2009)	Greenleaf (1977); Spears (ND)	10 ^a	2 Samuel 7	Yes	Benchmark
Green et al. (2009)	Greenleaf (1977)	9		Yes	Benchmark
Massey (2009)	Greenleaf (1977)	1		No	
Bekker (2009)		0		No	

Author(s)	SL Model(s)	Number of SL Dimensions	Scripture Reference	SL Depth?	Use of SL Theory
Volume 3, Issue 1					
Tangen (2010)		1		No	
Tucker (2010)	Greenleaf (1977)	(See note (a))		No	
Volume 3, Issue 2					
Irving (2011)	Greenleaf (1977); Irving and Longbotham (2007a); Irving and Longbotham (2007b)	0 9	Matthew 20 Mark 10 John 13	Yes	Model development
Huizing (2011)		2		No	
Crowther (2011)	Patterson (2003)	2	Mark 10	Yes	(limited)
Wilson (2011)	Greenleaf (1977)	0	Matthew 20	Yes	(limited)
Volume 4, Issue 1					
Vondey (2012)	Greenleaf (1977)	9	James 1, 3, 4	Yes	Benchmark
Huizing (2012)	(Not applicable)	N/A		N/A	
Burchard (2012)	(Not applicable)	N/A		N/A	
Volume 5, Issue 1					
King (2013)		0	Mark 10	Yes	(limited)
Chang (2013)	Greenleaf (1982); Spears (2010)	1 4	Matthew 20 Mark 10 John 13	Yes	Benchmark
Mckinney (2013)		1		No	
Bower (2013)	Greenleaf (ND)	0		No	
Volume 6, Issue 1					
Serrano (2014)	Patterson (2003)	8	1 Samuel 17	Yes	Benchmark
Thomas (2014)		0		No	
West (2014)	Greenleaf (1977)	(See note (a))		No	

Notes: ^aGreenleaf (1977) did not provide Servant Leadership dimensions, per se, but the author included his generally accepted description stating, “The servant-leader is servant first...” (p. 13).

Appraisal of Primary Articles

Appraising to the point of saturation, when new information was no longer forthcoming, the analysis included a thorough review of the primary articles for the Servant Leadership models or theories the authors referenced, which Servant Leadership dimensions they considered, what Scripture they referenced, and how they used Servant Leadership theory. These are highlighted in Column 6, Table 1.

Data Preparation and Analysis

The analysis included reviewing the discussion and conclusion sections of the original articles for information related to Servant Leadership models/theories, the associated dimensions of Servant Leadership, and relevant Scripture. As depicted in Table 1, all eight of the primary articles reference one or more recognized Servant Leadership models (or theories). Six of the articles (75%) reference Greenleaf (1977) as a source model or theory for Servant Leadership, and two do so exclusively (Green et al., 2009; Vondey, 2012). Three of the articles (38%) reference Patterson (2003), and only Serrano (2014) does so exclusively.

As illustrated in Table 2, there is very little consistency in the use of Servant Leadership dimensions in the articles with the exception of the seven formal dimensions delineated by Patterson (2003), which were used three times; however, two of the three articles that reference her research additionally reference dimensions found in other models.

Table 2

Servant Leadership dimensions used in the JBPL

Dimension ^a	Patterson (2003)	Russell and Stone (2002)	Page and Wong (2000)	Stone et al. (2004)	Spears (ND)	Irving and Longbotham (2007a)	Spears (2010)
Love	X						
Humility	X		X				
Altruism	X						
Vision	X	X				Foresight & Intuition	
Trust	X	X					
Empowerment	X						
Service	X	X					
Honesty		X					
Integrity		X	X				
Modeling		X					
Pioneering		X					

Dimension ^a	Patterson (2003)	Russell and Stone (2002)	Page and Wong (2000)	Stone et al. (2004)	Spears (ND)	Irving and Longbotham (2007a)	Spears (2010)
Appreciate Others		X			Accep- tance		
Servanthood			X				
Unconditional Concern				X			
Listening Awareness and Perception					X X		X X
Persuasion					X		
Conceptualize and Communicate					X	Communi- cate with Clarity	
Healing					X		
Build Community					X		
Contemplate Change					X X		
Model what matters						X	
Engage in honest self-evaluation						X	
Foster collaboration						X	
Value and appreciate						X	
Create a place for individuality						X	
Understand relational skills						X	
Support and resource						X	
Provide accountability						X	
Empathy							X
Commitment							X

Notes: ^aGreenleaf (1977) and Greenleaf (1982) were omitted due to lack of formal dimensions.

Seven of the articles (88%) make a direct reference to Scripture in relation to Servant Leadership, and six of these (75%) (Akinyele, 2009; Buford, 2009; Chang, 2013; Hardgrove, 2008; Serrano, 2014; Vondey, 2012) used Servant Leadership theory

as a benchmark or standard to evaluate something in Scripture instead of developing a Servant Leadership model. Only Irving (2011) explicitly used Scripture to develop Servant Leadership theory and its dimensions, focusing on three key New Testament texts: (a) Matthew 20, (b) Mark 10, and (c) John 13.

III. RESULTS

The results of the meta-analysis illustrate the current state, progress, and direction of Servant Leadership research and application evident in JBPL. The following organization highlights the synthesis and of the information and findings: (1) theoretical model selection, (b) theoretical dimension implementation, and (c) theory utilization.

Model Selection

The primary articles in the meta-analysis drew from eight different Servant Leadership descriptions (i.e., a model and/or definition with varying numbers of dimensions), to include: (a) Greenleaf (1977), (b) Patterson (2003), (c) Russell and Stone (2002), (d) Page and Wong (2000), (e) Stone et al. (2004), (f) Spears (ND), (g) Irving and Longbotham (2007a), and (h) Spears (2010). The least defined of these, at least from the perspective of the information presented in the articles, is Greenleaf (1977), which seven of the articles reference specifically. The most well-defined, again from the perspective of the information presented in the articles, is Patterson (2003), whom Serrano (2014) mentions exclusively.¹ Interestingly, but perhaps not surprising, five of the eight articles drew from more than one description of Servant Leadership. The exact reason for this is not clear, but one possibility is that the authors wanted to emphasize a Servant Leadership characteristic that one description did not include. For example, Akinyele (2009) initially mentions Greenleaf (1977) and his well-accepted description, “the servant-leader is servant first” (p. 13), but she then expounds using content from both Patterson (2003) and Stone et al. (2004) (see p. 57 and 74). If this was done to bolster an inadequate description, it potentially points to a weakness in the source description/model that may manifest itself in a confused presentation of Servant Leadership during application.

Dimension Implementation

From these eight different descriptions (i.e., a model and/or definition), the articles used a combined total of 34 dimensions to characterize the Servant Leadership, as depicted in Table 2. While there is some overlap, such as the characteristic *conceptualize and communicate* offered by Spears (ND), which appears similar to *communicate with clarity* offered by Irving and Longbotham (2007a), most of the 34 characteristics are discrete. As with the eight different descriptions, the use of more than 30 discrete characteristics creates the potential for even greater confusion when attempting to benchmark or evaluate a leader as a Servant Leader.

¹ To be clear, Serrano (2014) also draws from Greenleaf (1977), albeit indirectly through Patterson (2003), who built on Greenleaf’s work.

Theory Utilization

The meta-analysis showed that Servant Leadership theory could lead to a conceptualization of two distinct uses: (a) benchmarking or evaluation using Servant Leadership theory and/or dimensions, and (b) Servant Leadership theory development and refinement.

Benchmarking. Benchmarking is a term for comparing something against a known standard. Page and Wong (2000) indicated that a validated instrument (i.e., a standard) is useful for measuring a leadership theory such as Servant Leadership; moreover, they suggested that benchmarks facilitate its development (Need For Measuring Servant-Leadership section, para. 7).

Theory Development. Theory development involves the methodical process of refining or creating a model. According to Irving (2011), social science research provides the benefit of confirming the “utility or effectiveness of constructs that are inherently valid” (p. 120).

IV. DISCUSSION

Confusing patterns emerged from the meta-analysis of Servant Leadership in the JBPL. Providing an explanation, Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) indicated that “there is no generally agreed upon definition of what servant leadership is in terms of leader behavior;” elaborating, however, they also indicated that “no single measure can fully capture and operationalize” a construct with this level of complexity (p. 250).

Therefore, given the still-developing state of Servant Leadership theory, the results of this meta-analysis should not be surprising. Illuminating the problem, several researchers mentioned that the absence of a formally accepted definition creates one of the foremost challenges for developing, describing, and implementing the theory (Laub, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Lacking a formal definition to guide researchers in the developmental process, many descriptions for Servant Leadership have emerged, to include five that appear to be influential: (a) Spears (1995), (b) Laub (1999), (c) Russell and Stone (2002), (d) Patterson (2003), and (e) Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011).

Despite the developmental state of the theory, according to Van Dierendonck and Patterson (2010), Servant Leadership is beneficial to both organizations and followers (p. 5). Therefore, it is important that the JBPL continues to foster the theory’s ongoing development carefully. As such, the following recommendations serve as guidelines for preparing or evaluating Servant Leadership-related articles for publication in the JBPL. First, maintain awareness of ongoing research and publications that relate to Servant Leadership theory and its development. Second, review and incorporate the most current research when publishing Servant Leadership-related material. Third, aim for specificity. Recognize that the theory is in a state of development and, when referring to Servant Leadership, strive to provide clarity by associating the reference to a published Servant Leadership model/description. For example, instead of simply describing a leader’s performance with the vague phrase, “Servant Leadership,” or

mentioning Greenleaf's work, provide more detail, such as "... this leader demonstrated accountability, which is one of the eight dimensions of Servant Leadership as defined by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)...". This lack of specific information is the reason why 13 JBPL articles that mentioned Servant Leadership were eliminated from consideration for this analysis—they were simply too vague. Fourth, develop and refine Servant Leadership theory but do so by building upon the growing body of knowledge in this area of study. Fifth and finally, benchmark leader performance with Servant Leadership theory but be specific. (See the third recommendation—aim for specificity).

V. CONCLUSION

Servant Leadership theory has great potential for describing, promoting, and developing virtuous leadership behavior. Moreover, the JBPL could become an important venue for its theoretical refinement and development, but to do so, the journal must challenge both authors and editors to be precise and discriminating. Vague references to Servant Leadership only add to the state of confusion currently surrounding the theory; therefore, these should be identified and bolstered or omitted. In contrast, specific descriptions and references to Servant Leadership that align with the most current research and build on the theory's existing body of knowledge will serve to foster its ongoing development.

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