

Servant Leadership and Gender

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Throughout history, descriptions of many great leaders employ similar language to capture defining characteristics. Winston Churchill was called *charismatic*, Martin Luther King Junior a *visionary*, and Gandhi a *faithful* leader. However, there is a dramatic change of tone when the stories of historical female leaders are told. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the *iron lady*, serves as an ideal example of this inconsistency. Thatcher attained the highest office of leadership in her government and then facilitated one of the most transformative periods in Britain's modern history by empowering others to reimagine the infrastructure of their nation. Thatcher did so while being described as *bullying*

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and *unpleasant* (Hoggart, 2013)—quite different verbiage than the men who came before her. Seeking to build social capital in a male-dominated political arena, Thatcher adopted the command and control leadership style expected of her male counterparts for decision making, sacrificing a feminine persona in the process (Ponton, 2010). Thatcher's example illustrates the way women are systematically disadvantaged when seeking leadership roles because leader characteristics are most closely associated with masculine qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Women who act in a stereotypically feminine way may be passed over as unlikely leaders, unless they learn to act like a man (Kark & Eagly, 2010; Karau & Eagly, 1999). The challenge is bridging the gap between how men and women are perceived as leaders and who is believed to be fit to lead. An initial look at servant leadership poses it as a possible solution to narrow the gender gap for leadership roles.

In the past decade, leadership scholars observed a modern shift away from the command and control styles of leadership, toward a more follower-centric approach, which builds on relationships between leaders and followers and relies on qualities of care and respect (Dambe & Moorad, 2008). Servant leadership gained attention as part of the follower-centric shift and is poised to provide a model of leadership for experienced and aspiring leaders alike. As van Dierendonck and Patterson (2010) explained, "The ideal of a heroic, hierarchical-oriented leader with primacy to shareholders has quickly been replaced by a view on leadership that gives priority to stewardship, ethical behaviour [sic] and collaboration through connecting to other people" (p. 3). Servant leadership has the potential to unlock leadership opportunities for women to lead effectively while maintaining a feminine style, empowering women leaders to inhabit both leader and gender roles authentically.

The discussion in this chapter explores the relationship between gender and the servant leadership style, with a specific emphasis on how servant leadership may assist in filling leadership gaps and enabling women to inhabit leader and gender roles authentically. First, the origin and underpinnings of servant leadership offer a foundation for examining this style through a gender lens. Second, a brief review of research on gender and leadership is presented, demonstrating the need for reimagining the

leader role to improve the state of women's leadership. Third, the analysis of servant leadership and gender emphasizes the way in which the servant leadership style may be more compatible with the female gender role, thereby improving follower perceptions of women leaders. Additionally, research on the overlap between servant leader traits and gendered traits is outlined, including examples of women leaders using the servant leader style. Fourth, perspectives on servant leadership as gender-neutral versus gender-specific invite thoughtful consideration of how servant leadership may serve women leaders. Finally, servant leadership is explored as a style that aligns with a feminist ethic of care, creating the opportunity for women leaders to practice ethical leadership in a way that embodies feminist values and experiences. In the conclusion, future directions for research and dialogue are offered to continue the exploration of servant leadership and gender.

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf (1977) first conceptualized servant leadership after reading Hermann Hesse's novel *Journey to the East*, in which the central character is known to the reader as the servant of the traveling group but is later revealed as the group's leader. The core principle posits true leadership as an act of serving the ones being led. Although Greenleaf is considered the father of the contemporary discourse on servant leadership, the notion of other-centered, service-oriented leadership is not a new one. A posture of care and service toward others is echoed in the writings and traditions of many religions including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Trompenaars & Voerman, 2010). Conceptualizing leadership as a humble role rather than a lofty one shifts the relational dynamic between leaders and followers and changes the power balance, placing more emphasis on the follower's needs than the leader's desires. At first, the servant leader approach may feel counterintuitive to traditional notions of leadership as power and authority at the top of a relational hierarchy. Yet, Greenleaf (1977) argued that true power must be granted by followers based on their confidence and trust in the leader's "values and competence" (p. 16).

As Greenleaf (1977) advanced the idea of servant leadership, he described the mark of a servant leader in terms of follower welfare, saying, “The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (p. 13). A follower-centric approach by necessity requires specific leadership skills that bolster follower well-being. However, like many leadership theories, the ability to agree on a universal definition and list of characteristics for servant leadership is a challenge. Several scholars compiled lists of defining servant leader traits (De Pree, 1992; Spears, 1995), yet the specific parameters of the style are still open to interpretation. Even so, several generally accepted attributes capture the essence of servant leadership.

Focht and Ponton (2015) arrived at consensus on 12 primary characteristics of servant leadership. After distributing three rounds of questionnaires to identified servant leadership experts, a list of over 100 servant leader attributes was narrowed down to 12 essentials. These foundational tenets included “valuing people, humility, listening, trust, caring, integrity, service, empowering, serving others’ needs before their own, collaboration, love/unconditional love, and learning” (Focht & Ponton, 2015, p. 44). These attributes provide a starting point for identifying servant leaders as well as allowing servant leadership to take shape in a manner that can be understood and analyzed.

Theoretically, servant leadership theory envisions a leader who emerges through the act and role of serving the follower (Greenleaf, 1977). Practically speaking, the servant role and leader role do not integrate this easily, especially after adding in the socially constructed and conflicting social expectations servant and leader roles carry. The goal of inhabiting both a servant role and a leader role seems inherently problematic when considered in terms of social constraints such as status, stereotypes, and skills. The servant leader is a paradox at best that can only be understood through a shift in thinking about leadership; with a move from power to empowerment; from leader-centric to follower-centric; from dominance to service (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010).

The paradoxical expectation that invites the individual to embody two distinct social roles—the servant and the leader—makes servant leadership ripe for transforming women’s leadership. Women face challenges

in being perceived as competent leaders while displaying the warmth expected of them as women. Despite this dichotomy, servant leadership may have the potential to close the gap between these social roles and create favorable perceptions among followers for women who lead. A woman who can be perceived as both nurturing and capable, kind and qualified, may attract followers more effectively into the next generation of leadership.

Gendered Leadership

Time-honored notions of leadership rely on the belief that it takes a great person with specific leadership traits to be a great leader (Bolden, Gosling, Marturano, & Dennison, 2003). While specific definitions of leadership vary, and the attributes a leader must possess are sometimes diverse, idealized visions of leaders often have several traits in common, not the least of which is being male (Eagly, 2007). The traditional image of a strong, independent, direct, and decisive man leading the way has influenced behaviors of would-be leaders, ultimately coloring perceptions or expectations of how leaders *should* act (Eagly, 2007). Remnants of this model are clear at nearly all levels of leadership across a wide variety of industries and sectors. From government and finance to education and humanitarian affairs, beliefs about how leaders *should lead* are deeply embedded in social and cultural norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These perceptions can be particularly dangerous when held (consciously or subconsciously) at individual levels by supervisors, peers, and subordinates. The social imprint of historically male leadership can deeply influence whether a woman is promoted, whether she is viewed as competent, how satisfied followers are with her leadership, and other real and practical aspects of how she leads (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Since servant leadership hinges on the concept that leaders receive their power through the trust and freely granted commitment given by the followers, the stereotypes and norms that inform these perceptions are especially salient to the discussion of servant leadership and gender. For a servant leader, favorable follower perceptions are paramount to success. Followers are the primary audience and concern of the servant

leader. This follower-centric approach is grounded in the foundational book on servant leadership by Greenleaf (1977): “A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one’s allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader...” (p. 10). In short, followers choose leaders by choosing whom they will follow. Whether or not the followers believe the person is a good leader is a critical point in judging whether the leader is successful. What does that mean for aspiring female leaders? If women are not perceived by others as legitimate leaders, they may lose opportunities to hold leadership positions or be judged more harshly than their male counterparts when they do.

One perspective that often biases perceptions against female leaders is the “think manager-think male” paradigm (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011, p. 617). This paradigm describes the way preconceived ideas of leaders portray men as more fit to lead than women. Another concept presenting special challenges for women leaders is called the *double bind*, a phrase originally coined by Jamieson (1995). Grounded in social role theory, the double bind captures the competing social images of a strong, masculine leader role and the soft, caring female role. Stereotypically, masculine and feminine traits have been categorized as agentic and communal (Burns, 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009; Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Men are expected to display agentic traits such as being “assertive, controlling, confident ... aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent...” (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 574). Conversely, the communal traits women are expected to portray include being “affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle” (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 574). Traditional perspectives on leadership demonstrate leader behaviors are expected to align with the agentic qualities associated with masculinity, affirming think manager-think male biases (Koenig et al., 2011).

One of the foremost challenges women leaders continue to face in attaining and retaining leadership positions is overcoming preconceived perceptions of followers, peers, and superiors based largely on social role stereotypes and contradictions between the expectations for being female and a leader. Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) framed the dilemma this way:

The role congruity analysis thus suggests that female leaders' choices are constrained by threats from two directions: Conforming to their gender role can produce a failure to meet the requirements of their leader role, and conforming to their leader role can produce a failure to meet the requirements of their gender role. (p. 786)

In short, the soft-spoken, caring, and indirect behavior expected of a woman stands in stark contrast to the bold, outspoken, and independent behavior expected of a leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002). As a result of these contradictory role expectations, women leaders are faced with the double bind dilemma: Act like a leader and be disliked as a woman or act like a woman and be perceived as an incompetent leader. In either case, women leaders find themselves in a no-win scenario. For women leaders, the issue of role expectations as a leader is not simply solved by women adopting agentic behaviors. As Brescoll (2016) noted, "Indeed, when women do engage in agentic behaviors, they often experience backlash effects because they are also seen as insufficiently communal" (p. 416). These widely held cultural beliefs about how men and women *naturally* behave, combined with the expectations of leaders to be agentic, shape perceptions of who is best suited to lead and whether the leader is effective.

Implicit leadership theory asserts that mental prototypes of effective leadership influence whether an individual is perceived as a match to a leader role (Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Lord & Maher, 1991). In this sense, cognitive schema in the minds of the followers may have more to do with who is chosen to lead than the actual ability of the individual leader. This schema becomes especially problematic when groups of people sharing a specific trait, such as gender, do not match the prototypical leader ideal. For example, followers may view women leaders less favorably than male leaders because of the perceived mismatch between women and the leader prototype, arising from conflicting role expectations for women and leaders (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Lester, 2008; Ponton, 2010). The issue of gender and leadership affects not only individuals aspiring to leadership, but also the followers' confidence and satisfaction with the leader in the role. In fact, individuals often emerge as leaders or are removed from leader roles based on the evaluations and input of followers.

In many cases, lack of follower confidence for not exhibiting stereotypical leader traits means a lack of opportunity to lead. When followers do not envision women as so-called *leadership material*, then women are unlikely to gain entrance to the ranks of leaders in an organization or community. Further, these biases may impact promotion and retention rates of women in leader roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). In cases regarding promotion and retention of women, followers are the gatekeepers to the leadership role. Even if followers' perceptions are based on social role stereotypes that shape cognitive schema about how a leader looks and acts, the consequences of these perceptions can be real and tangible. Changing the perceptions requires reframing gender and leader social roles in ways that do not systematically exclude a people group. Simply put, if leader roles were reimagined in gender-neutral ways, men and women exhibiting a range of individual traits could attain leadership positions based on individual merit rather than social stereotypes.

Gendered perceptions of women as leaders have real implications for answering questions about whether men and women lead differently. Researchers cannot clearly determine whether men and women employ similar skills and strategies when leading because similarities in leadership styles may simply be the result of women adopting a masculine style to gain legitimacy as a leader (Baird & Bradley, 1979; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Additionally, leadership may require a set of gender-neutral common skills, making it difficult to disentangle leader behaviors from gender behaviors. A meta-analysis of the literature on gender differences in leadership styles demonstrated a mixed assessment of whether men and women inherently employ different leadership skills or styles (Eagly et al., 2003; see also Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Weider-Hatfield, 1987). Despite contradictory conclusions about gendered leadership styles and behaviors, researchers agree that as long as followers perceive masculine traits as signs of competent leadership, women leaders will face challenges in being perceived favorably and competently by followers (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Smith & Smits, 1994).

Brescoll (2016) identified the dominant belief that women are more emotional than men as a significant factor in biasing perceptions of

women leaders. If followers embrace the belief that women are more emotional than men, as over 90% of respondents did in a Gallup poll in 2000 (as cited in Brescoll), then follower perceptions of women leaders will be biased, particularly if emotions are considered incompatible with good leadership. However, a reimagined perspective on leadership consistent with the care for others advocated by servant leadership may transform emotion, as a leader trait, from a liability to an asset. If followers' views of what constitutes leadership changed, then perceptions of women leaders may be more positive as they demonstrate genuine care for followers.

The influence of social role expectations for men, women, and leaders on the perceptions of followers is not limited to women leaders. A study by Rosette, Mueller, and Lebel (2015) showed that male leaders were perceived as less competent when asking for help than their female counterparts who engaged in similar help-seeking activities. In this respect, help seeking was perceived as an acceptable behavior for women leaders but not for male leaders. Followers perceived male leaders seeking help less favorably because the behavior was viewed as inconsistent with masculine norms.

As exemplars of how certain behaviors may be perceived in gendered ways, the studies on emotion (Brescoll, 2016) and help seeking (Rosette et al., 2015) demonstrate the need to examine servant leadership characteristics through a gender lens. The interaction between socially constructed expectations for gender and leader roles plays a critical part in shaping follower perceptions. Within the framework of servant leadership where followers must choose to follow and follower welfare and satisfaction are key, examining servant leader attributes in comparison to stereotypical gender traits provides insights into how male and female leaders employing a servant leader style may be perceived by followers. An initial look at servant leadership reveals a promising approach to leadership with the potential to recreate the leader ideal in a gender-neutral way through the integration of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits. While multiple scholars promote this argument, others reject it, arguing instead that servant leadership is simply a redesign of masculine leadership that subjugates the feminine.

Gender and the Attributes of Servant Leadership

Several authors promote servant leadership as a new leadership paradigm employing gender-neutral or even communal traits that align with feminine stereotypes (Barbuto & Gifford, 2010; Duff, 2013; Hogue, 2016; Reynolds, 2011). From a gendered perspective, the hope is that servant leadership may provide a leadership style that enables women to enact the leader role in ways that are more compatible with the female gender role, thus diminishing disadvantages women may face in attaining leadership positions and receiving favorable reviews from followers once they do. Reynolds (2011) advocates for men and women leaders to develop a range of leadership traits from communal and agentic skill sets to maximize efficacy and enhance leader-follower relationships.

According to Barbuto and Gifford (2010), men and women are equally capable of cultivating and employing communal and agentic qualities as servant leaders. In their study, five dimensions of servant leadership were identified as either primarily communal or agentic. The traits wisdom and persuasive mapping were classified as agentic qualities while altruistic calling, emotional healing, and organizational stewardship were considered communal (Barbuto & Gifford, 2010). Followers were asked to rate their leaders on their use of the five servant leadership attributes and on their effectiveness as leaders. An ANOVA was conducted to test the main effects and interaction of gender on followers' perceptions of leader traits and effectiveness. The results demonstrated that men and women leaders used combinations of the communal and agentic skills regardless of leader gender, and there was no significant difference in perceived effectiveness for the male or female leaders.

This finding suggests servant leadership has the potential to minimize gender gaps by incorporating a range of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits into its leader ideal. In doing so, followers' expectations of how leaders behave may shift from a predominantly masculine or agentic emphasis to a vision of leadership that draws on a collection of strengths demonstrated by men and women and consistent with aspects of their gender roles as well. Yet, Reynolds (2011) asserted, "Although

predominantly feminine-attributed other-centered behaviors can be integrated into the construct of *leader*, femininity as an attribute can hardly be associated with the role of *leader*” (p. 157, emphasis in original). The relational qualities typically associated with being female may be added to the leader image, but this is not the same as shifting the paradigm from think manager-think male to think manager-think female. In fact, Reynolds continued to explain servant leadership may create a gendered dichotomy between the servant aspect as feminine and the leader aspect as masculine. In this sense, the paradox of a servant who leads is mirrored in the cultural paradox of a woman who leads. The servant, as the feminine form, is subjugated while the leader, the masculine form, dominates.

Therefore, two questions emerge: Is servant leadership an opportunity to create a gender-neutral leadership style in which a range of stereotypically masculine and feminine attributes are valued and employed by men and women in leader roles? Or, is servant leadership a repackaging of entrenched cultural attitudes about gender and gender roles, posing a feminine *servant* and masculine *leader* as a gendered paradox? The answers are not entirely clear. Still, the notion of a gender-neutral or, as some have termed it, androgynous leader ideal seems promising as a way of bringing balance to gendered traits associated with effective leadership.

Follower Perceptions of Servant Leaders and Gender

In addition to exploring the gendered enactment of servant leadership traits, some researchers considered how followers’ perceptions of leaders are shaped by the genders of the leader and follower. As Oner (2009) argued, the influence of leadership is a process in which followers’ perceptions of the leader are socially constructed and dependent on the meaning assigned to people and behaviors. It follows that gender may influence how followers perceive servant leaders in a variety of ways. Collins, Burrus, and Meyer (2014) examined the role of subordinate gender on perceived relational quality with supervisors. The researchers explained differences in how males and females are socialized create varied expectations for their relationships with leaders (Collins et al.). Collins and colleagues found that male and female subordinates interpreted and valued

different dimensions of the Leader-Member Exchange survey, an instrument measuring the quality of the leader-follower relationship, impacting how the employees rated their leaders. In this way, follower gender is a factor in shaping perceptions of good leadership (Collins et al.).

In another study of follower perceptions, Kark, Waismel-Manor, and Shamir (2012) included both leader and follower gender as a factor in follower perceptions of leader effectiveness and the follower's ability to identify with the leader in personal and meaningful ways. The impact of gender was considered in same-sex and cross-sex dyads (i.e., female/female or male/female) of leaders and followers. Then a multilevel regression was used to analyze whether gender shaped perceptions between followers and their leaders. Several interesting findings emerged, including: (1) male managers were perceived as more feminine by their male subordinates than by their female subordinates while the opposite was true for female managers; (2) women perceived female managers as more masculine than male employees did; (3) men demonstrating strong agentic qualities like assertiveness were perceived more favorably than their female counterparts displaying the same assertiveness; and (4) women perceived as more androgynous in their leadership traits were viewed as more effective, yet men failing to integrate feminine and masculine behaviors were perceived less favorably by their female subordinates but not by their male subordinates.

Taken together, the findings from these studies support the claim that leadership and gender as “two systems for organizing activity and organizing meaning (leadership and gender) are intertwined as are their outcomes” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 156). As promising as it seems to envision servant leadership as a gender-integrated leadership style, gender and leadership may be, in fact, two parallel social constructions that are intrinsically interactive and inseparable. For example, Hogue (2016) explained how perceptions of a leader vary more when the follower's gender is considered along with the leader's gender and leadership style (agentic vs. communal).

Despite claims that servant leadership integrates a range of feminine and masculine traits in the quest to unite servant and leader roles, Eicher-Catt (2005) argued convincingly that servant leadership is inherently gendered and steeped in patriarchal notions of male domination and

female subordination. Eicher-Catt's semiotic analysis through a feminist lens poses *servant* and *leader* as gender-laden terms that restrict the leadership dialogue through dichotomous thinking. Eicher-Catt concluded,

In sum, rather than neutralizing any gender bias, the apposition of 'servant' and 'leadership' instantiates a sign of discourse promoting an either/or logic that requires a perceived gendered choice. At any given time, a leader must privilege one conceptual orientation over the other since either creates different rules of the game pertaining to leadership. (p. 19)

Oner (2009) agreed with Eicher-Catt's assertion that servant leadership is necessarily gendered, yet posited that adding the feminine qualities to the servant leader ideal may still promote gender equity.

Reynolds (2011) explained the gendered conceptions of servant and leader exist in how these terms are understood and used to make meaning. Reynolds also described the way in which the meanings of *servant* and *leader* diverge from typical ideas about self-sacrificing subservience and individualistic power in Greenleaf's use of them to characterize his vision of an ideal leader. According to Reynolds, "*Leading* in servant-leadership has ... more to do with role-modeling, conscious initiative, and creating an environment of opportunity for followers to grow and thrive ... *Serving* has ... more to do with humble, empowered, ethical activism" (p. 164, emphasis in original). From this perspective, reimagining the roles of servant and leader changes the paradox of service and authority into a complementary set of attributes working cohesively for the good of the follower. If servant and leader roles are reimagined through a redefinition of terms, then perhaps their gendered nature shifts as well.

In addition to influencing follower perceptions and leader roles, gender may impact whether an individual values servant leadership qualities and strives to enact the servant leader style. A study by Rodriguez de Rubio and Galvez-Kiser (2015) offered evidence of gender, as well as age, as predictors of individual adoption of servant leadership. Women were more likely than men to value the characteristics associated with servant leadership such as caring and serving others. Based on this research, it is reasonable to consider whether women are more likely to choose a servant leadership style if their values align with the values and premises servant

leadership promotes. Hogue (2016) suggested that the communal traits represented in servant leadership characteristics may provide women with increased access to leadership roles and the opportunity to create a well-developed leader self-identity. This possibility has significant practical implications for women seeking or inhabiting leader roles, particularly if the servant leader style provides an open door for women to lead.

Women Who Serve

While women may be denied positions of influence when posed as leaders, the position of servant is socially compatible with femininity, thereby allowing women access to influence by serving first, then leading. There are multiple case studies highlighting women who have attained and retained leadership positions while self-identifying as servant leaders. These women utilized servant leadership as a means of legitimizing their leader power. For instance, Crippen (2004) examined the leadership legacies of three prominent pioneers in Manitoba, Canada over the turn of the twentieth century. The qualitative historical analysis of their lives, texts, and leadership activities revealed strong links to the key characteristics of servant leadership. In a time when women were relegated to the domestic sphere and female leadership in official capacities was uncommon, these women stepped into leadership through serving others.

Similarly, African women used servant leadership to influence their communities through a posture of service passed on through generations of women (Ngunjiri, 2010). Using a qualitative biographical review, Ngunjiri examined the lives and leadership of prominent African women who rose to leadership positions in male-dominated realms such as education and government in spite of highly patriarchal cultures. The servant leader persona operated as a powerful vehicle in the rise of these African women to official leadership roles (Ngunjiri). Perhaps most notably, the servant leader style allowed these women to unite authoritative leadership with feminine care. Ngunjiri explained,

The fact that the women in this study not only lead in ‘women’ organizations, but in mainstream institutions of education, government, non-profits

and others may demonstrate that indeed women who lead as women, retaining their femininity and in this case, their maternal roles as nurturers, caregivers, and servants of the people can and are effective as leaders. (pp. 25–26)

Servant leadership provided an opportunity for these women to honor the cultural traditions of femininity while demonstrating competence as leaders in their respective spheres of influence.

Building on Ngunjiri's (2010) work, Alston (2005) chronicled the challenges Black female superintendents faced in persisting in their leader roles, finding that servant leadership qualities aligned with their core values and self-defined leadership style. In the face of gender and racial prejudices creating barriers to leadership roles, the commitment to serve while also leading allowed these women to become stewards of the educational system as superintendents. In another study, an in-depth look at the experiences of the only Black female college administrator in a predominantly White institution revealed a similar commitment to serving others as the cornerstone of her leadership style (Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011). The case study documented the female administrator's experiences, including her mentors and the challenges she overcame in her journey to becoming department chair and associate dean. The Black female administrator self-identified with the servant leader style as a way of navigating the tensions between culture, race, gender, and social roles in her leadership positions (Dowdy & Hamilton, 2011).

From pioneer women in Manitoba to African women and leaders in education, these women and their stories illustrate the practical relevance of servant leadership as a means of transcending social norms of leadership to be women of influence. Servant leadership has the potential to open doors to leadership positions that might otherwise be closed to women because of cultural stereotypes or social norms; plus, the servant leader style empowers women leaders to demonstrate competence and care at the same time. For example, a study of female principals revealed that women used the servant leader style to combat gender stereotypes and build strong relationships with followers (Jones, Ovando, & High, 2009). The findings suggested collaboration and nurture were critical attributes of successful school leaders and key facets of the servant

leader style the women principals used. Additionally, women leaders who embrace a servant leader style may also be viewed more favorably by followers.

In an examination of teacher perceptions and satisfaction with principals' leadership, Ekinici (2015) concluded servant leadership behaviors may enhance teacher evaluations of their principals. Data from a sample of 663 teachers across 14 schools was collected to measure the perceived servant leader behaviors of their principals and opinions about the principals' leadership. While it is certainly not the case that all women leaders use a servant leader style, these threads of female leader success invite further inquiry about why some women have found the servant leader style to be particularly effective at helping them gain entrance to leadership positions, to lead successfully in those roles, and to be viewed favorably by followers.

One possibility for better understanding why servant leadership assists women in finding and keeping leadership roles is the emphasis servant leadership places on communal and relational qualities typically associated with femininity. This may allow female leaders to lead while minimizing the social backlash of perceived incongruence between the leader role and female gender role. In other words, in highly patriarchal cultures where women are less likely to be selected as leaders based on cultural biases, servant leadership may *disguise* the woman first as a servant, opening the door to leadership opportunities that might not otherwise be available if the woman approached these openings directly as a leader. In this sense, Greenleaf's (1977) original inspiration for the servant in Hesse's main character, who was known first as the servant and later as the leader, may reflect the leadership journey for many women who unassumingly lead through service. Disguised as servants, women leaders may be able to rise to positions of influence without threatening cultural constraints or male gatekeepers averse to women in leadership roles (Duff, 2013).

Without the mask of servant leadership, female leaders hoping to be perceived as caring women and competent leaders may not only struggle to gain legitimacy with followers, but lose a sense of self. Gardiner (2015) explained that women leaders who feel pressure to behave in prescribed ways as a leader may experience a disconnect between their convictions

and the need to conform to social norms for leader roles in order to attain or maintain a leadership position. The tension between performing the leader role and exercising personal values may undermine the woman's ability to lead authentically. Again, servant leadership theory emphasizes nurturing human growth, potentially resolving this tension and moving women leaders toward an authentic leader experience. As Gardiner emphasized,

When we broaden our definition of what constitutes authentic leadership so as to account for the myriad ways in which we live and lead, we discover how people without positional authority can change their communities in profound ways. Thus, leadership is not dependent upon a person's organizational position, but rather on how people's actions demonstrate how much they care for the world. (p. 8)

Similar to servant leadership, this perspective constructs leadership as a function of care for others, empowering female servant leaders to enact a feminine ethic of care in their leadership practice.

Servant Leadership as an Ethic of Care

The ethical aspect of the gender and leader intersection is significant as a space where motivating factors converge in a singular purpose to care for others. Care for others is a theme that resounds within servant leadership principles and stands out among qualities associated with femininity (Reynolds, 2011). Servant leadership aligns with feminist ethical values, thus allowing women to practice ethical leadership in an authentically feminine way.

Servant leadership's core tenets speak to a mandate of care between leader and follower. In fact, van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) proposed compassionate love is the cornerstone upon which all other servant leader attributes depend. Without compassionate love as a core motivation and guiding principle, the other servant leader traits could not function (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Reynolds (2011) argued that leaders motivated by care and concern for others align more closely

with a feminine role of nurturing others, which is consistent with an ethic of care. Noddings (1984) proposed an ethic of care as a feminist framework for ethical decision making, placing the needs of others as the highest ethical value. From this standpoint, servant leaders are motivated to make decisions in the best interest of followers, much like women engaged in caretaking activities such as mothering. Bateson (1990) described the nurture of human growth as the essence of homemaking and called for more attention to fostering human growth in industry, in education, and in community. A commitment to caring for others serves as the backbone of nurturing human growth.

According to van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015), the *Academy of Management Review* recently highlighted follower-centric leadership with “care and compassion” (p. 128) as particularly salient to leadership research and practice now and in the future. As an other-centered conception of leadership, servant leadership is positioned to equip leaders with the moral and ethical underpinnings needed to engage followers in meaningful growth and change. Although the ethic of care developed by Noddings (1984) was grounded in a feminine perspective informed by a mother’s care for her children, it is closely aligned with servant leader values and is not limited to women. Men and women can benefit from employing an ethic of care in their leadership decisions and interactions.

Similar to Noddings’ (1984) feminist ethic of care, Christians (1997) conducted a study across 13 countries on four continents in search of a universal ethical value, identifying the sacredness of human life as the highest ethical principle in a majority of cultures. Connecting the value of human life to care for others, Christians (2015) explained the way care for others is grounded in cultural and religious traditions such as Confucius’ *jen* and the biblical notion of *agape* love. The ethical ideals of *jen* and *agape* promote a commitment to the good of others as a moral imperative. The universal ethic of human care transcends diverse cultural values and informs a range of ethical dilemmas within myriad social contexts, including leadership. From this position of putting others before oneself, the servant leader is equipped to behave ethically in relation to others and in organizational decision making. van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) traced servant leader qualities to the intrinsic motivation of compassionate love for others, which aligns with Noddings’ (1984) feminist

ethic of care and the universal value of care for human life (Christians, 1997, 2008). The theoretical underpinnings of servant leadership and feminine ethical values are aligned; however, more research is needed to determine whether female servant leaders are empowered to act ethically in organizational practice.

Future Directions

While this chapter offers an overview of the research and perspectives regarding servant leadership and gender, the work in this area has only begun. Many opportunities exist for future research to develop a deeper understanding of the intersections of servant leadership and gender, particularly from the follower perspective. In broad terms, research employing various methodologies and in multiple contexts is needed to create a nuanced understanding of when servant leadership improves follower perceptions and opens doors for women to lead (or when it might be ineffectual). Longitudinal studies of servant leaders can uncover the long-term impact of gender on relationship building and organizational outcomes. In addition to these general opportunities for continued discovery in the realm of servant leadership and gender, there are several specific calls for more research to build on the existing literature.

Kark et al. (2012) offered several invitations for future research including: (1) controlling for individual differences across followers that influence perceptions of servant leader gender, (2) examining higher status female leaders where more masculine traits may be required, (3) longitudinal explorations of servant leader/follower relationships and gender across time, and (4) comparisons of objective measures of leader performance in addition to follower perceptions of male and female servant leader effectiveness. Barbuto and Gifford (2010) concurred, stating that a more comprehensive analysis of gender, servant leadership, and context will be crucial to forward movement. Collins et al. (2014) explored the impact of follower gender on ratings of leader efficacy; however, they called for future research to explore the impact of leader gender on follower ratings of satisfaction and efficacy. Additionally, a look at the interaction of leader gender and follower gender would be particularly

instructive (male and female subordinates rating male or female leaders). While research on same-sex and cross-sex leader–follower dyads has been done (Kark et al., 2012), more work in this area focusing specifically on servant leaders or organizations with servant leadership cultures is needed (Reynolds, 2011).

Hogue (2016) noted the need for field research (as opposed to lab research) exploring the impact of perceptions of servant leaders based on gender. Also, future investigation should examine how women may self-categorize as a servant leader to construct a legitimate leader identity, affecting her perceived suitability to a leader role. Several scholars call for additional study of the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender in servant leadership research (Brescoll, 2016; Rodriguez de Rubio & Galvez-Kiser, 2015; Rosette, Koval, Ma, & Livingston, 2016). For example, Ngunjiri (2010) described servant leadership as a cultural fit for African women, in particular, who are socialized to prize spirituality and service to family and community. The cultural bent of certain racial or ethnic groups may make them more likely to adopt a servant leadership style or be more accepting of men and women who use this style. van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) encouraged additional research on the instruments measuring interpersonal contexts, which is crucial to constructing additional theoretical and corporate models of servant leadership development. While the servant leadership style is not appropriate for all organizations or authentic for all women (Hogue, 2016), more research is needed to understand when servant leadership can provide a promising vehicle for women to inhabit female and leader roles in authentic and effective ways.

Conclusion

While servant leadership seems promising in its inclusion of stereotypical feminine traits that may diminish perceived inconsistencies between the female gender role and the leader role, it remains to be seen whether the servant leadership style can truly narrow the gender gap for leaders. Even if the servant leader style gains wider acceptance in organizational settings and increasing numbers of leaders use it, it is not a guarantee

of improved follower perceptions for women leaders. As Eagly et al. (1995) warned, “Adopting a feminine leadership style may not provide women with a sure route to unbiased evaluations of their competence as leaders” (p. 126). Changing follower perceptions of what constitutes good leadership must flow from a re-envisioning of the prototypes that inform interpretations of competent leader behaviors. Servant leadership has the potential to be part of this shift, but only if the paradox of servant and leader can be enacted simultaneously without subordinating one to the other (i.e., the servant as feminine subordinated to the masculine leader).

As a leadership style, servant leadership may continue to serve as a conduit for individual women to move into leadership roles through a service orientation that transcends gender biases. Women who self-identify as servant leaders may be able to renegotiate the culturally embedded stereotypes of both gender and leadership, successfully gaining and keeping positions of influence. Further, servant leadership may allow women leaders to enact their gender role and leader role in authentic ways, leading to enhanced follower perceptions and ethical decision making consistent with a feminine ethic of care. Taken together, these possibilities make the intersections between servant leadership and gender worthy of continued exploration.

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