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ORIGINAL PAPER

Just the Servant: An Intersectional Critique of Servant Leadership

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Abstract Servant leadership offers a compelling ideal of self-sacrificing individuals who put the needs of others before their own and cultivate a culture of growth in their organisations. Although the theory's attempts to emphasise the moral, emotional and relational dimensions of leadership are laudable, it has primarily assumed a decontextualised view of leadership untouched by power. This article aims to problematise servant leadership by undertaking an intersectional analysis of an Asian cis-male heterosexual senior manager in Australia. Through in-depth interviews with the manager and his staff, the article shows how his attempts to practice servant leadership were informed by intersecting power dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, age and class that subordinated him to white power. The findings demonstrate the ways servant leadership is necessarily embedded in wider power structures that shape who gets to be a "servant leader" and who remains merely a "servant".

Keywords Servant leadership · Intersectionality · Race

Introduction

The theory of servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977) has garnered considerable academic and practitioner interest for its emphasis on the moral, emotional and relational dimensions of leadership practice. Servant leaders by definition put the needs of others first and in turn foster an empowering organisational culture for their followers (Liden et al. 2008). Their social impact is said to extend beyond the workplace and create value for the wider community and society (McGee-Cooper and Looper 2001; van Dierendonck 2011). Although this attractive construct claims a unique focus on how leadership serves the needs of followers (Chiniara and Bentein 2016), it maintains an individualist, essentialist assumptions of leadership that has been called into question in the last decade. Specifically, the field of critical leadership studies (Collinson 2011) has illuminated dimensions of identity and power that remain overlooked in current theorisations of servant leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a; Fletcher 2004; Knights and O'Leary 2006; Sliwa et al. 2012; Spoelstra and Ten Bos 2011). Given the growing appeal and influence of servant leadership, critical examinations of the construct are timely.

In line with the tradition of critical leadership studies (Collinson 2011), this article begins from the social constructionist standpoint that leadership does not exist in any objective sense, but that it is about how people characterise, negotiate and practise what they call "leadership" (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2016). With its roots in Berger and Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), social constructionism focuses on the interactive processes between people by which leadership is produced (Hacking 1999). By extension, there is no fixed "truth" of leadership to be uncovered through positivistic scientific inquiry, rather, qualitative inquiry is favoured to explore the multiple realities that compete for legitimacy (Fairhurst and Grant 2010).

The aim of this article is to problematise servant leadership by analysing how power informs the practice of servant leadership in context. In order to achieve this aim, I investigate the following research questions:

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(1) How is servant leadership socially constructed between managers and subordinates?
(2) In what ways do intersectional axes of identity/power inform the construction of servant leadership?

In order to answer these questions, I conduct an empirical qualitative analysis that applies intersectionality theory (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991) to interrogate how an Asian cis-male heterosexual senior manager attempted to practice servant leadership, as well as how his staff responded to this claim. By adopting a critical constructionist approach, this article makes a contribution to theory by demonstrating how servant leadership is embedded in the sociopolitical context of its practice, and individuals who fail to embody hegemonic norms can ultimately be denied the title of "servant leadership".

This article begins with an overview of servant leadership theory and explores the application of intersectionality to this construct. In order to contextualise the analysis, an overview of race in Australia is provided, canvassing the dominant images that have shaped Australian imaginations of what it means to be "Asian". The methods of the study are then presented, followed by the findings. The implications for servant leadership theory are discussed, before concluding with recommendations for future research.

Servant Leadership

Ethics and morality have risen to the forefront of our focus in the current "postheroic" era of leadership theorising (Dinh et al. 2014). Driven by concerns over ethical scandals and malfeasance in the corporate landscape, this new approach to theorising promoted new conceptualisations of leadership as distributed, follower-centric, and directed towards positive, collective purposes (Badaracco 2001; Gronn 2002; Harris 2009; Pearce and Conger 2003). When postheroic theorising called into question the unethical conduct in previously venerated forms of "charismatic" and "transformational" leadership (Conger 1990; Tourish 2013), servant leadership began to attract academic attention from the 1990s as a new ideal.

Inspired by Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, servant leadership was originally proposed by Greenleaf (1970) as a way of life rather than a management technique. A core characteristic of servant leaders is an ability to transcend their self-interest (van Dierendonck 2011). They are said to be called to leadership not for personal power or prestige, but an innate desire to be of service to others as well as their organisations and communities (Reed et al. 2011). The measure of a servant leader is therefore not confined to functionalist outcomes of organisational performance and profit, but prioritises instead the growth of those being served (Greenleaf 1977). The final test for servant leadership is that followers are said to become servant leaders themselves (Greenleaf 1977; van Dierendonck 2011).

There have been numerous attempts to distil servant leadership into an authoritative theoretical framework comprised of measurable traits and behaviours. A sample of this includes Russell and Stone's (2002) nine attributes of vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modelling, pioneering, empowerment and appreciation of others. Liden et al. (2008) offer seven dimensions: emotional healing; creating value for the community; conceptual skills; empowering; helping subordinates grow and succeed; putting subordinates first; and behaving ethically. van Dierendonck (2011) proposes six characteristics, suggesting that servant leaders empower and develop people, show humility, are authentic, accept people for who they are, provide direction, and are stewards who work for the good of the whole. This lack of consensus on how to define servant leadership has contributed to a fractured field of scholars who largely appear to test and refine their own models in isolation from other theoretical developments of servant leadership.

In recent years, empirical studies of servant leadership have revealed some insights that complicate its practice. In one of the most in-depth studies to date, Palumbo (2016) conducted a month-long participant observation of a work team within a charitable organisation in Tanzania. Although he found the leader's practice of servant leadership elicited her team's trust, loyalty and cohesion as anticipated in the literature, it also unexpectedly strengthened the followers' dependency on her. Rather than being empowered, the team members struggled to make decisions and take action in the absence of their leader. Palumbo's (2016) findings resonate with previous research that has revealed the alienation and helplessness that can be experienced by the followers of charismatic and transformational leaders (Bligh and Schyns 2007; Gemmill and Oakley 1992; Khurana 2011; Ruth 2014). This hints towards a possible "dark side" of servant leadership and emphasises the importance of critical empirical investigation into servant leadership practice.

With this article, I seek to contribute to the advancement of critical leadership studies (Collinson 2011) by offering an intersectional critique of servant leadership. From a social constructionist approach (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003b; Fairhurst and Grant 2010; Liu 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2016), I draw on intersectionality theory to explore how interlocking power dynamics inform who gets to be constructed as a "servant leader" (and who does not).

The Intersectionality of Leadership

White masculinity has stood as the leadership norm and exemplar until its hitherto invisible dominance began to be denaturalised by gender and race theorists (Collinson and Hearn 1996; Knights and O'Leary 2006; Liu 2015; Liu and Baker 2016; Nkomo 2011; Parker 2005; Rhodes 2012). Working from critical traditions of feminism, critical race theory and postcolonialism, these scholars challenged the ways individualist and essentialist approaches in the mainstream leadership literature neglected the contextual and political nature of leadership (Knights and O'Leary 2006). In doing so, mainstream leadership theorising has reinforced assumptions of a "universal" white male subject untouched by power (Liu and Baker 2016). Despite the advancements made by critical studies of leadership, the rise of servant leadership has so far eluded systematic interrogations of its assumptions of a similarly decontextualised universal subject.

This article draws on intersectionality theory to help attend to the multiple, interlocking power structures underlying our social meanings and practices of leadership. Intersectionality is an evolving concept that broadly refers to a recognition of the "complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation—economic, political cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts" (Brah and Phoenix 2004, p. 76). An intersectional perspective rejects the dominant notion of identity categories as additive, where the experiences of Black women for example are explained by the culmination of static experiences of blackness and femaleness. Rather, research from this perspective addresses the dynamic, nonsynchronous and sometimes even contradictory influences of various identity categories, while remaining sensitive to the diverse makeup within each socially constructed group (Acker 2012; Essers et al. 2010; Holvino 2010; Knight 2016).

Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), the term "intersectionality" was developed to demonstrate and challenge the limitations of the law in accounting for the intersection of racial and gender discrimination, and thus address the marginalisation of women of colour. As a sensibility, intersectionality is rooted even further back in history, surfacing through the work of Black and Latina feminists whose exclusion from both women's rights and civil rights movements led them to argue against their single-axis approaches that overlooked the experiences of women of colour (Davis 1981; hooks 1981; Hull et al. 1982; Lorde 1984; The Combahee River Collective 1977). Concerned centrally with women of colour's struggles for justice, intersectional theorising shows that oppression cannot be reduced to either gender or race, but is produced through multiple, intersecting axes of power (Collins 2000, 2012).

Applications of intersectionality to leadership studies have been primarily concerned with the barriers to non-white leaders' career progression, detailing the struggles they experience in persuading others and themselves of their legitimacy as leaders (Eagly and Chin 2010; Jean-Marie et al. 2009; Ospina and Foldy 2009; Richardson and Loubier 2008; Sanchez-Hucles and Davis 2010; Von Wahl 2011). Specifically, these studies have revealed the ways non-white leaders feel pressured to help their white managers and peers feel more comfortable around them by suppressing their deviance from the white masculinist norms of leadership (Kamenou et al. 2013; Kellerman and Rhode 2007). For example, non-white leaders often regulate their identities, avoiding "ethnic" clothing, hairstyle and speech patterns that can have them perceived as the "other" (Essers et al. 2010; Kamenou et al. 2013; Parker 2005).

Although intersectional studies of leadership have produced valuable insights about marginalised leaders, its focus on identity has produced a cursory engagement with intersectional inequalities (Rodriguez et al. 2016). According to Dhamoon (2011), intersectional research can be characterised via four points of focus: individual identities (e.g. Black women); categories of difference (e.g. gender and race); processes of differentiation (e.g. gendering and racialisation) and systems of domination (e.g. patriarchy and white supremacy). Although comprehensive intersectional analyses across multiple foci can be found in the wider organisational literature (see for example, Knight 2016), empirical studies of leadership intersectionality for the most part elide processes of differentiation and systems of domination, thereby neglecting the context of leadership. This article will attempt to ground its intersectional analysis within the context of leadership practice (Fairhurst 2009), and towards this goal, the following section will provide a historical overview of Asian race relations in Australia before presenting the methods of the study.

Research Context and Methodology

Race and "Asianness" in Australia

Following the Federation of Australia in 1901, Australia legislated a racial hierarchy through the White Australia policy, which limited the arrival and endorsed the deportation of non-European migrants (Curthoys 2003). To shore up hostility against the growing number of Chinese migrants who had arrived in Australia from the Pearl Delta

region of South China from the mid-1800s, representations of the "yellow peril" were disseminated through the mainstream media (Ang 2003; Tan 2006). These discourses produced pervasive images of the incoming Chinese migrants as smugglers, gangsters and licentious opium smokers, which served to construct the Chinese as a menace to an otherwise moral white society (Kuo 2013).

Since the abolition of the White Australia policy in 1973, an opposing multicultural national identity emerged in a landscape of post-war immigration and globalisation (Jayasuriya et al. 2003; Stratton and Ang 2013). Pride for our multicultural society swelled at the start of this decade within an "Asian Century" discourse (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). This discourse emphasised the economic rise of Asia, a region comprising many of Australia's largest trading partners, and became concerned with how Australia can "seize the economic opportunities that will flow and manage the strategic challenges that will arise" (Commonwealth of Australia 2012, p. ii).

Since the 1970s, stereotypes of the "yellow peril" have been overshadowed by new images of Asian migrants as the "model minority". In the USA, Asian migrants are typically regarded as middle to upper-class high-achievers predisposed to academic and professional success (Chae 2004). Scholars have challenged this ostensibly complimentary construction, exposing the ways this image is evoked by political leaders to delegitimise the social movements of primarily Black and Hispanic social justice activists (Cho 1997). The mythologised successes of Asian Americans are cited by politicians as the "proof" that racial barriers are non-existent, while pitting the different communities of colour against one another (Cho 1997).

In countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, the model minority stereotype more frequently constructs Asian people as introverted "nerds" who may have some technical capabilities (e.g. as accountants, bankers and small business owners), but devoid of individuality and incapable of creativity or innovation (Kwek 2003; Ray 2003; Yeh 2014). Attributions of their diligence or work ethic simply serve to paint Asian people as a homogenous horde set on the steady yet sterile pursuit of material wealth (Parker 2000; Yeh 2014).

Through a stated desire to become "Asia ready" (Australian Industry Group, 2012, p. 1), the Asian Century has prompted a renewed emphasis on organisational diversity, purportedly to facilitate effective economic partnerships between Asia and Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2012; O'Leary and Tilly 2014). At the same time, the call also highlighted critiques of Australia's entrenched exclusionary ideals in the context of corporate leadership, leading to accusations of a persistent "bamboo ceiling" in Australian corporations (Soutphommasane et al. 2016). Replete through the rhetoric of the Asian Century is an emphasis on how organisations may better *use* Asian talent in the service of organisational profit and performance (O'Leary and Tilly 2014). Even within ostensibly pro-diversity discourses that extoll the organisational benefits of racially diverse leaders, Asian people are constructed as docile bodies to be put to the service of corporate profit and performance (Liu 2016). Little is known about the perspectives and experiences of Asian people who attempt to lead as their voices and agency remain largely silenced.

Methods

This study is positioned within a social constructionist paradigm that recognises the relational, contextual and discursive nature of social reality (Grant et al. 2011; Hacking 1999; Phillips and Hardy 2002). The wider study originally set out to explore how race informed leadership through interviews with 21 Chinese Australians conducted in 2014. My biography informed my choice to focus on people who identify as Chinese, allowing me to draw on my own experiences as a starting point for shared reflexivity and dialogic engagement with others who shared my identification (Clough 1994; Denzin 2009).

This article analyses the case of one participant in particular, Jeff, a senior manager of a large Australian information technology company. I sought Jeff's self-identification as Asian (specifically Chinese) and Australian, which contributed to the diverse sample of participants in this study including those born and raised in mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, the U.S. and Australia, and ranging from third generation Chinese to recent migrants. Jeff himself was born in Taiwan and first immigrated to New Zealand at the age of 10 before arriving in Australia at 17.

Over the course of May to June 2014, I interviewed Jeff four times for a total of 5 h and 48 min. Due to the sensitive nature of our conversations, interviews took place in local cafés and restaurants suggested by Jeff. Our first interview began with a life history approach— "tell me about your background, your childhood, where you went to school and your memories growing up"—and then proceeded in an informal, unstructured way. Through this format, Jeff engaged in the dynamic process of identity construction as he chose which aspects of his life and work he wished to narrate (Nicholson and Carroll 2013; Ybema et al. 2009). The three follow-up interviews focused on specific topics Jeff wished to elaborate on that emerged from our first interview, namely his diversity advocacy work, past resistance to his leadership as well as a discussion about this work team.

Additionally in early June, I observed a 1-h morning meeting Jeff ran with six of his staff. The company adopts a matrix structure so Jeff was only one of four functional

managers to which his staff reported. Since Jeff's appointment to the role, he has scheduled weekly meetings with his staff to discuss recent organisational and client activities. At the time of this meeting, Jeff was preparing to be seconded to another role in business strategy in July. As such, it was also attended by his successor, who was shadowing Jeff in preparation to take over his position. Following their meeting, I interviewed each of Jeff's six staff one-on-one on their perceptions of Jeff's leadership, lasting between 15 and 30 min, in a private office on their department floor. The interviews with Jeff's staff were semi-structured, first asking them to discuss their role in their company and how it relates to Jeff's role. Staff members were then asked to discuss their impressions of the previous meeting, linking to their experiences working for Jeff in general and his overall leadership approach. The participants featured in this analysis are listed in Table 1. Anonymity was offered to Jeff, which he declined, but pseudonyms are used for his staff and identifying information about their company, colleagues and clients have been removed.

In contrast to the servant leadership literature, this article sees leadership as constructed between social agents via their interactions, patterns of coordination and struggles over meaning (Fairhurst and Grant 2010; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien 2012). For example, a senior manager may be titled a "leader" by virtue of their role, but they also need to continually regulate their presentation to convince others (and themselves) that they are "really" a leader. Interviews and participant observations of meetings are suitable for social constructionist analyses of leadership as they allow the researcher to examine how leader and follower identities are negotiated through the mundane language-in-use among the manager and his staff (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Sveningsson and Larsson 2006; Thomas and Linstead 2002).

By recognising how processes of identity formation are grounded in power, the analysis can also draw links between Dhamoon's (2011) conceptualisation of the multiple levels of intersectional theorising. What it means to be a "leader" along with what it means to be a "man", "Asian" and so on, can be traced to wider sociopolitical meanings embedded in systems of domination. A constructionist perspective thus renders the boundaries between identities, categories of difference, processes of differentiation and systems of domination more fluid, allowing the researcher to explore the dynamic interrelations between these various points of focus.

Transcripts were coded for their references to servant leadership following an iterative process driven by both the theory and data. Coding proceeded via the *a priori* specification of attributes and behaviours of servant leaders identified from the literature, such as references to "humility" (van Dierendonck 2011), "appreciation for others" (Russell and Stone 2002) and "helping subordinates succeed" (Liden et al. 2008). At the same time, coding paid attention to follower perceptions including responses that were not anticipated in the literature, including ambivalence, resistance and delegitimisation, which suggested the complex social construction of servant leadership within its specific contexts of practice. In the proceeding findings, rich interview excerpts are included in order to showcase the voices of the research subjects.

Becoming a Servant Leader

Jeff is a senior sales manager in a large IT company based in one of Australia's metropolitan cities. He was in his late thirties at the time of the interviews and identified as cismale, heterosexual and able-bodied. Through the interviews, Jeff constructed his leadership identity in line with the attributes and behaviours canvassed in the servant leadership literature. In particular, Jeff eschewed a focus on his personal career ambitions and expressed instead a profound sense of accountability to work towards the good of the whole (Russell and Stone 2002; van Dierendonck 2011):

> I'm not just interested in doing what *feels* right, I'm actually interested in what actually *is* right. I was born in Taiwan, and one of the key things that I found that's quite different is that in the Australian workplace, it's okay for things to mess up so long as it's not my fault. If I can just lay the blame on somebody else it's okay. In Taiwan, even if it's not your fault you still have to find a way to fix it. That was drilled into me very early on. So for me I'm more interested in whether what I'm doing is actually going to lead to any real outcomes; not just a good presentation, big motherhood statements and self-promotion. I think for the longest time that defined how I acted. In retrospect, I think that's the reason why I have such good long-term relationships with a lot of dear friends because ultimately I don't care about fame or looking good or anything like that. I care more about whether I can deliver what I promise.

Specifically, Jeff expresses a long-standing commitment to promoting cultural diversity in organisations and society. As he discussed this aim, he frequently framed himself as an "advocate" whose primary role was to be of service to others (Reed et al. 2011) who share a common mission to foster inclusivity:

> Cultural groupism is hard to breach, but it'll be worthwhile. … People think differently, they have

Table 1 Participants of the study

Participant	Role	Ethno-racial identification	Gender	Age
Jeff	Sales manager	Chinese (Taiwan)	Male	30s
Matthew	Sales manager (Jeff's incoming successor)	White (Anglo-Celtic) Australian	Male	30s
Daniel	Product sales specialist	White (Western European) Australian	Male	40s
Colin	Sales associate	White (Anglo-Celtic) Australian	Male	50s
Christopher	Sales support	White (Anglo-Celtic) Australian	Male	50s
Henry	Customer service specialist	White (Anglo-Celtic) Australian	Male	50s
Owen	Data specialist	White (Anglo-Celtic) Australian	Male	50s
Andrew	Customer service specialist	White (Anglo-Celtic) Australian	Male	50s

> different ways of expressions, different values, different logic. And if you can get them to engage, that's where new ideas will come from. … When we get diversity right, Australia will be a lot better off. Our mission will unlock Australia's productivity. It's about making us relevant, being a major player in the [Asia Pacific] region. And, you know what, it's about making every one of our lives better off.

Jeff's advocacy of cultural diversity suggests a commitment to serve his organisation and the economic future of Australia over his own pursuit for status and promotion (Reed et al. 2011). This construction of his wider purpose led Jeff to maintain a humble, self-effacing construction of his own leadership (van Dierendonck 2011):

> Interviewer: What I'm hearing underneath a lot of what you're saying is that you're not saying that you see yourself as the one who will make that change. It's almost like you see yourself-
> Jeff: As a catalyst. I'll tell you what, I actually don't see myself as part of the equation. I see a mission, and that's it. I'm doing what any person in their right minds would do, and that's to articulate as well as I can. One of my favourite quotes of all time is from Harry Truman. He says basically, 'It's amazing what you can accomplish when you do not care who gets the credit'. And that's my attitude to this problem. We all have a role to play, but the mission is above any of us. It's not about whether I ever become CEO, Prime Minister, or whatever. It's got nothing to do with that. … Cultural diversity just makes sense. It gives us ways to new ideas, new ways of doing things, new ways to relate to people, new ways to see this world.

Through the day-to-day operations of his department, Jeff exhibits the behaviours of servant leadership including trust and honesty as he empowers his subordinates and support them to grow and succeed (Liden et al. 2008; Russell and Stone 2002). This is demonstrated most notably through his weekly staff meetings. Every Thursday morning at a coffee shop near their office, Jeff holds a team meeting typically lasting an hour where he would buy his staff coffee and update them on news relating to their clients and their organisations. Although the meetings are optional to attend, his staff reported that they found them valuable and tried to participate every week.

In the meeting I observed, Jeff drew on his extensive professional networks to relay sensitive information about their key stakeholders. For example, he revealed how the mother of one of their colleagues was in hospital and respectfully noted how this situation negatively affected this colleague's engagement at work. Jeff showed his propensity to minister to the emotional healing of others (Liden et al. 2008) when he cautioned his team to anticipate delays to their colleague's task delivery, but remain sympathetic and understanding, before adding that he would send flowers to the hospital on behalf of their team. Similarly, Jeff spoke candidly about newly appointed managers at the company, sharing his assessments of their motivations and interests, in order to support his staff in liaising effectively with the new recruits. Jeff also used the meeting to give recognition to his staff, singling out three members over the course of the hour and expressed his appreciation for their respective efforts in working overtime, solving a client problem and delivering exceptional service (Russell and Stone 2002).

Servant, not Leader

Despite Jeff's exhibition of the attributes and behaviours specified in the servant leadership literature including humility (van Dierendonck 2011), emotional healing (Liden et al. 2008), support and appreciation for others (Russell and Stone 2002), and a selfless commitment to the greater good of the community (Greenleaf 1977; Reed et al. 2011), Jeff's subordinates rejected the construction of their manager as a "servant leader". The employees

acknowledged the efforts Jeff made to empower and support his team, but they did not attribute this to leadership. Rather, they saw it as Jeff's rightful place to serve their needs. Through an intersectional analysis of the interview and meeting data, the findings suggest that Jeff's failure to be seen as a servant leader by his subordinates is informed by interlocking power dynamics around his race, gender, sexuality, age and class.

The employees' views of Jeff were primarily underpinned by the abiding stereotype of Asian identities as the model minority. The model minority figure is a passive but hardworking individual who focuses on assimilating into the dominant white norm rather than challenging the status quo (Chae 2004; Cho 1997; Yeh 2014). While the model minority is touted as an exemplar for more resistant communities of colour (Cho 1997), it is at the same time ridiculed in white culture through representations of Asian migrants as nerdy and repressed. Jeff's construction as a model minority hinges on his age, his middle-class status and his heterosexual cis-male presentation. Older Asian men are more typically portrayed as stoic patriarchs and working class Asian men are more likely to be villainised as gangsters (Chan 2001). Queer Asian men are more commonly rendered invisible as they disrupt the dominant stereotypes of Asian masculinities as asexual (Fung 2005).

The model minority stereotype surfaced in a common theme among the employees to focus on Jeff's technical abilities and coordination activities. For example, Andrew began our interview describing how valuable Jeff's weekly meetings are:

> I find [the meetings] perfect. I find it ideal, because it lets me know what Jeff's doing, lets Jeff know what I'm doing. I know what the whole team's doing, they know what I'm doing. So we're all on the same page, rather than tripping over one another, if you know what I mean. … I'd love to have this sort of forum with all of my [managers] … but unfortunately, Jeff's the only one that's organised enough [laughs] to be able to get it done.

Owen stated: "He's fairly diligent in what he tries to do, there's no doubt about that. He seems to have a lot of things on his plate; he takes on ownership of a lot of things. At the same time, he will also delegate out when he thinks he can, and when he thinks it's necessary". Colin also extolled Jeff as an exemplary manager to work with: "Jeff [is] totally professional, dedicated, organised, he plans everything … he's a dream to work with so I don't mind helping him out and doing things for him".

Although the employees acknowledge Jeff as a competent manager, his capabilities are confined to administrative tasks of planning and organising meetings. Andrew and Colin praise these efforts, but their testaments imply that they feel entitled to Jeff's service without any of servant leadership's veneration of altruism (Greenleaf 1970, 1977). Owen offers a backhanded compliment instead, suggesting that Jeff may sometimes try to take on too much. Owen's comment suggests the scrutiny on managers of colour who are suspected of stepping out of their bounds (Liu 2016). The model minority stereotype thus casts its subjects as natural servants, rather than servant leaders in their own right.

Jeff's leadership is also fundamentally gendered. Where white masculinities have been consistently found to bolster one's claim to leadership (Collinson and Hearn 1996; Kerfoot and Knights 1993), Jeff's racialised masculinity had a deleterious effect on his construction as a leader. In white-dominated societies, Asian men have historically been subordinated as feminised, weak and asexual compared to white masculinities (Chou 2012; Liu 2017). This stereotype was perpetuated to support anti-miscegenation laws (Chan 2001) and colonial myths about "deviant" native men (Sankaran and Chng 2004).

The feminisation of Asian masculinities was evident in how Jeff's staff described him as not "aggressive" compared to other sales managers, and attributed this to an essentialist view of Asian passivity. For example, Daniel recalled his first impressions of Jeff as "very quiet initially, but he's just softly spoken that way. I guess that might be a cultural thing. … I've seen him stressed, but not ever aggressive, necessarily. It could be a cultural thing again [laughs]". In Owen's words, "he's not an aggressive person by nature. He's more- he will direct where to go". Christopher concurs that his initial impression of Jeff was that he was "quiet, unassuming, but very open". When we closed the interview, Christopher summarised his construction of Jeff: "He's a very easy guy to go to work with. The only thing I find is that he's quiet, so sometimes you've got to draw him out a little bit. Quiet as in volume-wise as well as [chuckles] 'what are you trying to say exactly?'"

In line with this racialised and gendered representation, some employees characterised Jeff's social and communication style as soft, sensitive and subtle, as Daniel explains:

> I think Jeff is genuinely a nice guy, and respectful of other people. … When we get into a bind … he will try and somehow soften any blow, or defend any sort of positions that we've taken. So with [a recent major project], we were late in submitting, but that never came across in the discussion. It was more like we did lots of work to get it in on time, so it's sort of softening of the pitch, which is nice. It's good to have someone like that I guess. I think he knows how to manage up, and use the right language to provide the right interpretation of a message and deliver it the

> right way. A lot of that is his sensitivities, and the right language and sending out subtle messages—not necessarily directly but indirectly. I think he is acutely aware of all these things. That's probably why it feels like an easy engagement because he probably just makes it all work in the background. … I think he will defend you … he brings that sense of, not protection, but that he'll work with you to try and present the right picture.

Christopher singles out a particular conversation during the morning staff meeting:

> He spends a lot of time on relationships, and it's important when you're relationship selling to understand the people you're working with, but also the customer. And any insight you can get from other areas, it all helps. Even down to the personal things about how [a colleague's] mother is sick. That helps you when you're talking to him, to first of all understand some of his responses, or why he's responding the way he is, and secondly, to approach them differently.

The coolness of Daniel and Christopher's feelings towards their manager can be seen in the half-hearted descriptions of Jeff's capabilities, punctuated with reluctant remarks of "I guess" and "probably". Both acknowledge Jeff's efforts as being about serving his staff, yet deny Jeff the hegemonic white masculine qualities that underpins the construction of leadership (Collinson and Hearn 1996).

Daniel invokes notions of Asian masculine weakness when he compliments Jeff for being a "nice guy" and "respectful of other people". Being older than Jeff, Daniel further rejects the construction of Jeff via masculine, managerial expressions of paternalism (Kerfoot and Knights 1993); refuting Jeff's defence of his staff's failures as "protection", but just "that he'll work with you". Feminised discourses of Asian masculinities reappear when he lauds Jeff's "sensitivities" and abilities to "[send] out subtle" and "indirect" messages to a higher authority in order to showcase Daniel and his colleagues' efforts.

Jeff's communication skills could have been constructed in terms of servant leadership behaviours such as building community, providing interpersonal support, and helping subordinates grow and succeed (Liden et al. 2008; Reed et al. 2011; van Dierendonck 2011). Jeff's social networks could have even been emphasised to challenge the model minority stereotype of Asian professionals as socially awkward "nerds", yet Christopher only conceded that Jeff "spends a lot of time" on his professional relationships. The fruits of Jeff's labour are again centred on the benefits they provide to Christopher, who along with the other white male staff remain the real protagonists of the story. Where Palumbo (2016) found that followers can become dependent on servant leaders, these findings suggest the converse; where followers accentuate their agency, capabilities and destinies, while downplaying the role of their manager who they see as existing to aid their ambitions.

Implicit suggestions from Jeff's staff that he was not "tough enough" to be a leader reflected the abiding white masculinist ideals of leadership as about an individualised assertiveness or aggression denied to male Asian bodies. Owen was most explicit about Jeff's unsuitability to be a leader when he compared Jeff and his incoming successor:

> Jeff has always been someone who would be fairly thick-skinned in terms of making sure he goes and knocks on people's doors and all the rest of it. Matthew is always much more concerned about what other people might think of him, and tries to understand the relationship and the politics and actually plays them. With Jeff, I think he's more of an outsider to the politics. He understands the relationships and what they're doing, but he might not be intimately involved in the political side of things. I think Matthew is more likely to be involved in the politics. … There's a difference; one is an observer and the other is a player. I think Jeff is more of an observer, but Matthew is probably potentially a player. … I guess I wouldn't see Jeff as [a CEO], no. … He's too much of a nice guy for that sort of stuff. I don't think he's tough enough in that respect [laughs]. … If he wants to go further, he's going to have to play the game a bit more. I think he knows what's going on there, but he's not really in there influencing them. Other than that he's a nice guy and I wish him well.

Owen draws on an East/West cultural binary in his comparison between Jeff and Matthew. Within this dichotomy, Jeff is constructed as stereotypically passive, remaining "more of an observer", albeit one who is predisposed to dogged perseverance through adversity (Parker 2000; Yeh 2014). Despite having had little experience working with the incoming manager, Matthew's whiteness more readily qualifies him as the active "player" between the two. Where Jeff can only hope to have the technical capabilities to "understand" organisational relationships, Matthew commands the power to influence them.

While seemingly speaking to Jeff's leadership, Colin centres much of the interview on himself to emphasise his analogous skills around networking and problem-solving, while claiming joint ownership over achievements in the company:

> Jeff is certainly an asset to the organisation. I can't speak highly enough. He's much like myself. He plays basketball and I play squash, so we have

> outside interests where we draw on our strengths, and I think it's important to have sort of an interest outside this organisation to do stuff, because I find you build up a network of people and it's very reflective. … There are great things that Jeff and I—since I started with [the department]—we've turned them around. We've stopped the noise on a lot of issues, which is great. But that's not saying they're perfect. It's just only we're focused on getting stuff done and resolving all of the issues.

Similar to Owen, Colin cites a white manager that he and Jeff worked with and define Jeff in relation to this hegemonic model of leadership:

> Back then Jeff learned a lot from Adam Parker, the senior sales manager who was on the [client] account. I learned a lot from him, but I think Jeff learned a lot from him as well—what he is today. Adam was a great mentor, not just to me but to Jeff as well, and a good leader. … [The client] was a very demanding customer; very focused on money [laughs] and cost. … You learn from good operators like Adam Parker, and we did. I thought he was a great loss to the organisation as a whole.

In our interviews, Jeff never spoke of having leadership role models, but here Colin credits "what [Jeff] is today" with a former white male sales manager. White masculinity is recentred as the leadership norm and ideal as Colin constructs Jeff as the perennial follower.

Henry remained the only staff member who elevated Jeff above himself and accepted Jeff as a leader:

> Jeff's a very intelligent person. … I think probably what holds Jeff back sometimes from being the Prime Minister of this country … [is] sometimes he's just too intelligent for most people, and that is threatening to them, unless they're very secure. … Even this morning [at the staff meeting], it defies my knowledge how he can have such an integral understanding of the many variables about what we do. I don't have meetings with other sales managers who go into the depth that he does. … He understands the nuances between different people, their political alignment, their business alignment, their personality. … If you can appreciate it, you sit there with adoration, like I do on my face, just looking at him going, "You are amazing", like a broken George Michael record [laughs]. Other people may look at it and go, "That intimidates me", or, "I'm threatened by that", or, "You're just too smart".

Henry's class identity contributed in part to his ease with their leader-follower relationship. Although by appearances Henry resembled the hegemonic white male professional, his working class background led him to misidentify with the corporate leadership norm and thus reject the power struggles between Jeff and the other employees. As he spoke of Jeff's intellect, Henry discloses:

> I didn't go far in my schooling education environment. … I, unfortunately—without being too personal—family life dictated that home wasn't a good a place for me at a very early age. I left just before I did my school certificate. So left just before Year 10. I found myself earning money, living out of home and doing whatever. So I didn't really have that kind of formal education.

Although the corporate context of their company promotes an educated elite class professional ideal, Australian society has historically celebrated a working class identity (Bellanta 2012; Whitman 2013). In this respect, Henry did not see his lack of formal education as a source of shame, but rather, accepted it with an Australian cultural spirit of light-hearted self-deprecation. Henry suggests that while his colleagues are threatened by Jeff's power, his self-deprecating attitude means he does not share their resistance to an Asian male leader. At the same time, Henry distanced himself from the white masculinist environment of the sales team and aligned his professional identity with his particular role as a customer service specialist, framing his work as being grounded in an ethos of care:

> I've done a variety of different jobs, and I found myself in this particular position purely by chance. Many years ago I had picked up communication skills [when] I used to manage bars, which isn't really a great lifestyle when you want to start growing up. … I tried to get out of that particular environment and I found myself in a call centre. I've managed to change that to where I am now … which basically I don't think is any great feat; it's just taking that great ethos of wanting to help people and transferring it to the job I do now. I used to be a nurse many years ago too.

Henry's cited propensity to attend to the needs of others resonates with the notion that servant leaders cultivate the kinds of organisational climates around their followers that inspire and empower them to serve (Greenleaf 1977; van Dierendonck 2011). However, the relational dynamics of Henry's identity construction are more complex than what is proposed by servant leadership theory. The literature implies that servant leaders unilaterally develop other servant leaders from otherwise "blank slate" followers. But as the interview with Henry suggests, he is engaged in ongoing identity work that occurs through and beyond his relationship with Jeff. Further, his potential practice of servant leadership would equally depend on the co-

construction of his identity among other social actors who could in turn reject this attribution in the context of their dynamic, intersectional relationship.

Concluding Discussions

This article sought to problematise servant leadership by investigating the experiences of a manager of Asian descent attempting to practise servant leadership in the white-dominated Australian corporate context. The subject of the analysis, Jeff, conformed to the hegemonic Australian masculine ideal (Connell 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) in every way but race. He identified as cis-male, heterosexual, holding a senior management position in his late 30s, married with two children, comfortably middle-class, tertiary educated with an MBA, and not only able-bodied, but a tall, athletic basketball player. As a "1.5 generation" Chinese migrant, Jeff also benefited from speaking fluent English with a broad Australian accent (Johansson and Śliwa 2014); making his racial otherness only evident in appearance. Despite this relatively minor aspect of his intersectional identity, Jeff met considerable resistance to his leadership.

In answering the first research question, the findings suggest that the practice of servant leadership is necessarily co-constructed between managers and employees. In his interviews, Jeff recounted his enduring commitment to a greater purpose advocating for cultural diversity in Australian organisations. Facing personal and professional risks, Jeff maintained the belief that fostering inclusive workplaces would ultimately strengthen his organisation and bolster Australia's economy in the Asian Century (O'Leary and Tilly 2014). Through initiatives such as the weekly meetings, Jeff leveraged his social networks to share organisational information that empowers his staff to do their jobs more effectively, while utilising them as platforms to recognise and praise his team. Although such demonstrations of humility, selflessness and compassion are venerated in servant leadership theory (Greenleaf 1977; Parris and Peachey 2013; van Dierendonck 2011), its promises were not so straightforwardly delivered.

Informed by underlying dynamics of power, Jeff's staff embraced their manager as the "servant" while questioning his claim to "leadership". The more ambivalent employees were quick to construct Jeff as "not tough enough" to be a *real* leader, reinforcing the individualist ideals that emerging "postheroic" theories like servant leadership have attempted to challenge (Dinh et al. 2014). Even those who seemingly appreciated Jeff expounded only his technical and functional abilities within an invidious model minority stereotype (Chae 2004; Cho 1997; Yeh 2014). There was little evidence to suggest a climate of growth, trust or cohesion was fostered in the organisation as a result of Jeff's leadership approach (Greenleaf 1977; Russell and Stone 2002; van Dierendonck and Patterson 2015).

In answering the second research question, this article has demonstrated through an intersectional analysis how sociopolitical meanings of race, gender, sexuality, age and class inform the extent to which people can be accepted or rejected as a "servant leader" (Dhamoon 2011; Nash 2008; Rodriguez et al. 2016). As white supremacist ideologies historically constructed Asian immigrants as naturally subordinate (Kwek 2003; Parker 2000; Ray 2003), Jeff's servant leadership behaviours were rendered "illegible" as acts of leadership. His attempts to exercise servant leadership were more readily interpreted as his appropriate deference to white employees, rather than valiant acts of selflessness. In contrast, most of the employees centred their identities as the protagonists of the organisational narrative within the assumption that white people are the rightful leaders and beneficiaries of the corporate arena (Hage 1998; Leong 2012; Liu 2016). Jeff's differentiation from the Australian leadership norm is also necessarily gendered as his construction was grounded in discourses of a weak and feminised Asian masculinity (Chan 2001; Chen 1999; Hirose and Pih 2010; Liu 2017; Louie 2002) that is seen to be inferior to the paternalistic and competitive forms of white masculinity idealised among corporate leaders (Collinson and Hearn 1996; Kerfoot and Knights 1993). Class dynamics singled Henry out as the exception. His misidentification from the elite class norms of the corporate environment meant that he did not share his colleagues' sense of entitlement over corporate power and privilege, and in turn felt unthreatened by Jeff's authority.

With the exception of Henry, all the employees spurned their construction as "followers", positioning themselves instead as equal or superior to their manager. In recent years, critical studies of leadership have highlighted the ways followership (as with leadership) is negotiated between organisational members (Carsten et al. 2010; Gabriel 2015; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). Followers are not homogenous blank slates who statically sit within organisational hierarchies. They are dynamic, socially constructed subjectivities that may accede or resist leadership (Collinson 2006). This study suggests that servant leadership needs to account for a more complex and nuanced view of followership that is invariably shaped by systems of domination and maintained by processes of differentiation (Dhamoon 2011; Nash 2008). Notably, servant leadership is unlikely unilaterally imbued into followers as the literature suggests (Greenleaf 1977; van Dierendonck 2011), but part of an ongoing process of identity co-construction.

The findings presented in this article ought to be viewed in light of the limitations of the study. Confining the

analysis to one manager was necessary to enable in-depth examination of his subordinates and the dynamics between their intersectional identities, but it provides just one snapshot of leader-follower relations. Studies taking a longitudinal focus or canvassing multiple work teams could explore the effects that ongoing power struggles and identity work have on the lived experiences of so-called minority leaders. Interviews with Jeff, for example, suggested that he did not passively accept the role of the servant, but used it in many ways to advance his wider purpose for workplace inclusion. Future research could thus explore cases where non-white leaders may subvert white supremacist and colonial ideologies that relegate them as subordinate to the white authority, and illuminate the forms of resistance against existing racial structures. Following in the steps of the followership literature, future theorising of postheroic leadership could also extend upon more nuanced understandings of followers by examining the intersectional dynamics between their relationships with leaders, particularly the ways followers may demand traditional "heroic" models of leadership.

In conclusion, the critical intersectional analysis of leadership allowed the article to examine how processes of differentiation and systems of domination informed an Asian cis-male heterosexual senior manager's attempted practice as a "servant leader" (Dhamoon 2011; Nash 2008). Although Jeff demonstrated many of the attributes and behaviours of servant leadership including humility, emotional healing, support and appreciation for others, and a commitment to the greater good, his subordinates challenged the construction of their manager as a servant leader. Interviews with Jeff's staff highlighted the ways they largely accepted white supremacist ideologies embedded in the Australian context of immigration and multiculturalism that relegated Jeff's role to the service of white power. The employees reproduced notions of Asian masculine weakness and passivity via the model minority myth, so that even those who praised Jeff framed him as the aid to their own ambitions.

The article problematised servant leadership and its power-neutral assumptions of a leadership ideal untouched by dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, age and class. In this case, white supremacist ideologies developed through our history of immigration and multiculturalism shapes our positioning of what it means to be "Asian" as antithetical to what it means to be a "leader". The findings also extend intersectional theorising in leadership by broadening the focus beyond individual identities to show how identity interrelates with processes of differentiation and systems of domination (Dhamoon 2011; Nash 2008). In taking a more holistic approach to intersectional theorising, it has re-engaged with the context of leadership (Fairhurst 2009), while identifying the ways our prevailing racial hierarchies are reinforced through mundane processes by minority leaders and their white subordinates.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author, Helena Liu, declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Human and Animals Rights Subjects have given their informed consent and the study protocol has been approved by the institute's committee on human research.

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