SERVANT-LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES WITHIN AMERICAN AND SOUTH KOREAN CULTURES

—SCOTT LINCOLN

Although servant-leadership is not a fundamentally new idea, it has received more attention in the last few decades. While the concept has a number of proponents in the Western world, there is a paucity of research on how acceptable its tenets are for Asian audiences. Certain studies (Winston and Ryan 2008; Trompenaars and Voerman 2010) purport that servant-leadership is a leadership style that can be applied globally in various cultural contexts. However, on the face of it, this seems to contradict the central idea of culturally endorsed implicit leadership theories put forward by the venerable GLOBE study (House et al. 2004), which states that people from differing cultures expect different things from their leaders. This research aims to explore how the various aspects of servant-leadership behavior appear through the differing value systems of a Confucian Asian culture such as South Korea and a more individualistic culture such as the United States.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Although many of the basic tenets of servant-leadership could be found over 2,000 years ago in the philosophies of the ancient Chinese, Indian, and Greek civilizations (Townsend 2005; Trompenaars and Voerman 2010), the modern servant-leadership movement springs from the writings of Robert Greenleaf, who coined the term in an essay in 1970 (Greenleaf 1977; Spears 1996). Greenleaf stated that servant-leaders first "make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served," that servant-leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (27). He also posited that those being served would grow as persons to "become healthier, wiser, freer, more

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autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants" (27). Spears (1995) listed ten characteristics of the servant-leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Although often viewed as a soft leadership style, the Magellan Executive Resources research project found that between 1994 and 2004, the group of eleven publicly traded companies most frequently mentioned as implementing servant-leadership achieved much greater growth than the S&P 500 companies (Sipe and Frick 2009).

A formal servant-leadership model was introduced by Patterson (2003) as an extension of transformational leadership theory, although the focus of the servant-leader on the followers rather than on the organization distinguishes them from transformational leaders (Stone, Russell, and Patterson 2004; Parolini, Patterson, and Winston 2009). This theoretical model includes the constructs of love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. It was subsequently developed into the servant-leadership assessment instrument (SLAI) (Dennis and Bocarnea 2005), supported empirically in a military context using the SLAI (Earnhardt 2008), and extended into a circular model that includes followers (Winston 2003). However, this is not even close to the only model that has been developed. Including the SLAI, twelve different servant-leadership scales have been developed for empirical research purposes (Peltz 2011). Van Dierendonck (2011) remarked that taking these different models into account reveals a total of forty-four servant-leader attributes, even though many of these attributes have clear overlaps. One of the more recent instruments, and the one chosen for this study, is the Parsimonious Servant-leadership Measure (Fields and Winston 2010), which distills servant-leadership down to ten items as seen in Table 1 with the labels used for each item in this study.

Implicit Leadership Theories

Everyone has a slightly different idea of what the ideal leader would look like. These idiosyncratic, personal models of leadership are called *implicit leadership theories*. We use implicit leadership theories to distinguish leaders from nonleaders, and to evaluate their effectiveness (Lord and Maher 1991). These implicit leadership theories can influence many areas of an organization, including the development of dyadic relationships,

Table 1.

Actual items from the Fields-Winston Parsimonious Servant-Leadership Measure with the accompanying label being used for this study

	Actual Survey Item	Label
1	Practices what he/she preaches	Authentic
2	Serves people without regard to their nationality, gender, or race	Unbiased
3	Sees serving as a mission of responsibility to others	Servant Mission
4	Is genuinely interested in employees as people	Relational
5	Understands that serving others is most important	Service Minded
6	Is willing to make sacrifices to help others	Sacrificial
7	Seeks to instill trust rather than fear or insecurity	Instills Trust
8	Is always honest	Honest
9	Is driven by a sense of higher calling	Higher Calling
10	Promotes values that transcend self-interest and material success	Transcendent Values

followers' self-efficacy (Landefeld 2009), and the success of strategic initiatives (Werther 2003).

Lord and Maher (1991) asserted that there are two possible processes that influence our perceptions of leadership. The first is that leadership can be inferred from the results that we see. The second is to compare an observed person with the prototypical model of ideal leadership that we store in memory. In other words, we compare real people with our ideas of what a leader should be and decide whether they are leaders or not, and if they are, whether they are good leaders or not. But our minds may be changed by the results that we witness. Therefore we might alter our perceptions of someone we thought was an incompetent leader, or not a leader at all, if that person achieves good results.

This is important because it has been shown that the closer the congruence between followers' implicit leadership theories and their perceptions

of their leader, the more likely they are to view their leader as possessing a charismatic leadership style (Koommoo-Welch 2008). These attributes of charisma are especially strong if both processes are occurring at the same time, although it appears that collectivistic cultures favor attributing leadership characteristics based on company performance, whereas individualistic cultures rely more heavily on comparing their leader with their prototypical model (Ensari and Murphy 2003). Despite the differences in process preference, attributions of charisma are desirable for both Asian and Western countries (Dorfman et al. 1997). Dorfman et al. found that the charismatic leadership style increases followers' satisfaction with leadership in both South Korea and the United States. In South Korea, organizational commitment was also increased. Of course, this is all based on the followers' perceptions, and it has even been suggested that to be an effective leader, the perception of leadership traits is more important than the actual possession of those traits (Lord and Maher 1991).

Culturally Endorsed Implicit Leadership Theories

Cultural differences naturally affect followers' views on the ideal leadership style (Bass 1990; Brodbeck et al. 2000; Hofstede 1993; House et al. 2004). It has been suggested by Hunt, Boal, and Sorensen (1990) that a culture's values and ideologies have an important influence on superordinate level prototypes and implicit leadership theories. They propose that superordinate prototypes will be widely shared in strong or uniform cultures, but weaker cultures or societies with multiple subcultures will show a wider variance. Therefore, South Korea could be expected to have internally consistent implicit leadership theories since its population is homogeneous ("CIA World Factbook" n.d.).

The two most influential cross-cultural studies that help address leadership issues are the Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede 1980) and the GLOBE study (House et al. 2004), which was based on Hofstede's earlier work. Comparing the two studies, some characteristics stand out. Hofstede's study shows the dimension of Individualism being the point of greatest difference, with the United States being very high, and South Korea being very low. In fact, the United States has the highest score for individualism of any country measured, whereas South Korea scores in the bottom 20% for this dimension (Hofstede n.d.). This dimension represents the inverse of the GLOBE study's dimensions of In-Group

and Institutional Collectivism. Both studies show that Americans are far more individualistic, whereas South Koreans are much more collectivist. According to Hofstede, in collectivist societies such as South Korea, people are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, which are expected to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Both studies also indicate that South Koreans have a higher expectation of Power Distance, or the extent to which societies accept authority, power differences, and status privileges (House et al. 2004).

The GLOBE study goes further in defining six dimensions of culturally endorsed implicit leadership theories, which indicate the type of leadership styles that are considered effective in various cultures. The dimensions are: Charismatic/Value-Based, Team Oriented, Participative, Humane Oriented, Autonomous, and Self-Protective. The contrast between the scores for the United States and South Korea on the dimension of the Participative style is most striking, but there are also significant differences in Charismatic/Value-Based and Self-Protective styles. A Participative style is highly desirable in the United States, but counterindicated for South Korea. A Charismatic/Value-Based style also appears significantly more attractive to people in the United States than in South Korea, while South Koreans appear to be more accepting of a Self-Protective style than Americans.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Given these types of cultural differences, we might wonder whether servant-leadership would be appropriate for both of these cultures. Winston and Ryan (2008) concluded that servant-leadership is a global leadership style. Trompenaars and Voerman (2010) purported that the diversity and flexibility of servant-leadership make it ideally suited to bridge the gap between differing value systems. Han, Kakabadse, and Kakabadse (2010) found that the concept of servant-leadership holds parallel meaning in China to that of the West. Pinner (2003) found that some tenets of servant-leadership resonate well with Asian cultures, such as empowerment in a group setting, participative management, community development, healing, listening, intuitive foresight, humility, and building the capacity of the company. However, Pinner also felt that other aspects of servant-leadership do not translate well into the Asian organization, such as inspiring trust, receiving criticism as a gift, emphasizing personal development, and being held personally accountable for results. Moon (1999) found that Korean leaders tend

to think of servant-leadership as weak in Korean culture. However, Yoon (2012) discovered that, in a South Korean setting, empowering leadership and organizational learning capability positively predicted voice behavior. Öner (2012) found that Turkish employees do not consider paternalistic leadership and servant-leadership to be inconsistent, even though the Western populace thinks of them as mutually exclusive. Öner surmised that this was based on the social acceptability of power distance, which would also make it applicable to a Korean context.

A couple of studies have attempted to find a relationship between servant-leadership and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Molnar (2007) discovered a significant correlation between Hofstede's dimension of masculinity and servant-leadership. Hannay (2009) concluded that servant-leadership is best applied in cultures with low power distance, low to moderate individualism, low to moderate masculinity, low uncertainty avoidance, and a moderate to high long-term orientation. This would indicate that neither the United States nor South Korea would be particularly good environments for a servant-leadership model. For although Korea's scores on individuality, masculinity, and long-term orientation indicate a good match, its scores on power distance and uncertainty avoidance are far from ideal. The case for the United States is even worse, with only power distance and uncertainty avoidance levels matching up well, and levels of individuality, masculinity, and long-term orientation working against it. However, Hannay's study was not empirical in nature, and while Molnar's study was empirical, the significant findings were limited to just one of Hofstede's dimensions.

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to measure the difference in preferences for the ten dimensions of servant-leadership from the Fields-Winston Parsimonious Servant-Leadership Measure as caused by cultural differences between American and South Korean university students. The study involved quantitative methods that utilized a validated survey instrument to measure preferences for ten different servant-leadership behaviors using a forced-order ranking system. Null hypotheses were then tested for statistically significant differences in the preferences between American students and South Korean students for the following dimensions of servant-leadership: Authentic,

Unbiased, Servant Mission, Relational, Service Minded, Sacrificial, Instills Trust, Honest, Higher Calling, and Transcendent Values.

Survey Design

A survey including pertinent demographic information and the ten items of the Fields-Winston Parsimonious Servant-Leadership Measure was administered online through SurveyMonkey. This was seen as the best way to attain the largest possible sample. The survey was administered in English with a Korean translation included for the students located in South Korea. The survey included pertinent demographic information and the ten items from the Fields-Winston Parsimonious Servant-Leadership Measure. This instrument was developed by exploratory factor analysis using twenty-two behaviors that a panel of experts chose as being unique to servant-leadership. This analysis led to a single ten-item factor that accounted for 75 percent of the variance with an alpha 0.96 (Fields and Winston 2010). Although the original survey uses a five-point Likert scale response, it was deemed more appropriate to use a forced order ranking to determine differences arising from cultural factors. The subjects were instructed to rank the choices in order of importance according to the characteristics they value in a great leader, with (1) being most important through (10) being least important. See Figure 1 for an example item.

The survey that was distributed in South Korea was identical to the one distributed in the United States except that the items had Korean translations alongside the original English, because, while all Handong students are required to take some major classes in English and to understand English reasonably well, some South Korean students might have had trouble with the nuances of some items. It was also hoped that translating the items would increase the response rate among the Korean students.

In my opinion, a great leader ...

Most...... ....Least
1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Serves people without regard to their nationality, gender, or race   ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯
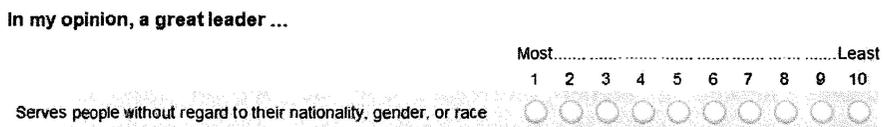
Figure 1.

The items were translated by both a native English speaker familiar with Korean and a native Korean speaker familiar with English. The purpose of the demographic questionnaire was merely to ascertain the subject's nationality.

Population and Sample

The population consisted of approximately 500 American business students from Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, and approximately 900 South Korean management students from Handong Global University in Pohang, South Korea. Both are Christian universities of similar size, with Southeastern having about 2,800 students and Handong having about 3,400. Two professors, one from each university, invited all of their students to take the survey through a link provided through the campus intranet. The sampling was random, determined simply by which students responded to the survey request, although all of them were encouraged to do so by their professors. The initial responses included 92 respondents to the American survey and 124 to the survey distributed in South Korea. Of those, some indicated nationalities other than American or South Korean and were removed, leaving 81 American respondents and 114 South Korean respondents.

Data Analysis

The data were obtained from SurveyMonkey.com in a format that was adequate for analysis. SPSS statistical software was used to perform a two-tailed t-test on each of the ten research hypotheses to determine whether a statistically significant difference was observed at a 95% confidence level between the American and South Korean groups. Since this was an exploratory survey with no assumptions as to the direction of the differences, the two tailed t-test was deemed to be appropriate.

Results Summary

As can be seen from Table 2, three of the ten research hypotheses can be accepted in favor of the corresponding null hypotheses. The American students showed a higher preference for the Servant Mission and Sacrificial aspects, while the Korean students had a higher preference for the Transcendent Values aspect. Although the groups showed statistically

Table 2.

Results of the t-test. Survey items were ranked from (1), most important, through (10), least important, so lower means indicate a higher level of preference. N = 81 (US), 114 (Korean).

Results: Group Statistics

	Nationality	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Honest	US	3.81	2.594	−1.321	193	.188
	Korean	4.32	2.622			
Authentic	US	4.25	2.528	.818	193	.415
	Korean	3.93	2.764			
Sacrificial	US	5.25	2.442	−2.186	184	.030
	Korean	6.07	2.790			
Relational	US	5.48	2.784	−.188	193	.851
	Korean	5.55	2.471			
Instills_Trust	US	5.51	2.540	1.874	193	.062
	Korean	4.81	2.586			
Service_ Minded	US	5.60	2.814	1.805	193	.073
	Korean	4.88	2.746			
Higher_ Calling	US	5.72	3.314	−1.046	144	.276
	Korean	6.18	2.560			
Unbiased	US	6.20	2.808	.568	150	.571
	Korean	5.98	2.297			
Transcendent_ Values	US	6.33	2.924	3.201	193	.002
	Korean	5.01	2.792			
Servant_ Mission	US	6.85	2.698	−3.667	193	.000
	Korean	8.28	2.669			

significant differences for these three items, the actual differences in the means only ranged from .82 for Sacrificial to 1.43 for Servant Mission with standard deviations ranging from 2.44 to 2.92. This indicates a large dispersion within each group and a large overlap between them. In addition, while

Servant Mission showed a significant difference between the group means, it was ranked last for both groups.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Certain studies (Winston and Ryan 2008; Trompenaars and Voerman 2010) purport that servant-leadership is a leadership style that can be applied globally in various cultural contexts, and that certainly appears to be the case for these two subject groups. Even though the values and culturally endorsed implicit leadership theories of these two cultures show areas of drastic contrast, their preferences for servant-leadership behaviors match up surprisingly well. That the Authentic and Honest items ranked in the first two places for both cultures speaks volumes to the fact that even on opposite sides of the globe, people want their leaders to tell them the truth and stand behind their word.

That the Korean students showed a significantly higher preference for the dimensions of Transcendent values would seem to contradict the GLOBE survey results (House et al. 2004), which indicated that Americans had a higher preference for Charismatic/Value-Based leadership styles.

The fact that the Korean students valued the Servant Mission and Sacrificial dimensions less than their American counterparts seems to confirm Moon's (1999) findings that servant-leadership can be seen as weak in a Korean context, and also the GLOBE findings that Koreans are more accepting of a self-protective leadership style. Both results may have roots in the higher level of power distance generally found in Korean culture, which leads to expectations that the leader should hold a position of higher status.

Although three of the ten items showed statistically significant differences in preferences across cultures, the most striking thing is the similarities. Both cultures ranked Authentic and Honest in the first two places, Instills Trust in the top five, and Unbiased, Higher Calling, and Servant Mission in the bottom four. The differences between the means for all but two items were less than 1 with standard deviations running between 2.3 and 3.3. This shows that individual differences within the groups are more substantial than differences between the groups, and although three items showed statistically significant cultural bias, it would not be difficult to find individuals from either group who felt differently.

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This study was done at two small Christian universities where the majority of the students surveyed were business or management majors, Christian, and lacking in significant work experience, so that may have led to some of the similarities. But at least for these two groups, this study leads to the conclusion that the same type of servant-leader would be equally well received even by subjects from these vastly different cultures.

Limitations

A few handicaps and difficulties probably hinder this study from being extended to the broader populations. The first is the fact that since the study was conducted at Christian universities, the overwhelming majority of respondents are strong Christians, which is not true of the general population in Korea at least ("CIA World Factbook" n.d.). The second is the translation of the survey items. Although every precaution was taken to make the translations as accurate as possible, some loss in nuance is inevitable when translating between two such different languages as English and Korean. The third is that only students from business and management departments were studied. Most of these students have probably had specific training on leadership principles that most members of their respective general populations would not have had, and that could have caused biases for certain leadership behaviors. The fourth is that although a forced order ranking system is appropriate for showing differences in preference due to culture, it does not allow for subjects to indicate exactly how strongly they prefer certain behaviors over others.

Implications for Future Research

Confirmatory research should include a more diverse group of Koreans and Americans taken randomly from the general populations, including both Christian and non-Christian subjects as well as subjects that span various generations. A larger study might also reveal whether the items that failed to show significant differences are really preferences that are shared between the two cultures or just failed to reach a significant level due to the relatively small size of the population. A similar study using different countries from the West, and the Confucian Asian countries, would shine some light on whether these results are limited to these specific countries or are common to countries from their general regions.

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APPENDIX A

Parsimonious Servant-leadership Measure (Korean translation added)
     In my opinion, a great leader ... 내가 생각하는 훌륭한 리더는

1. Practices what he/she preaches
   말과 행동이 일치한다.
2. Serves people without regard to their nationality, gender, or race
   사람들을 인종,성별,국적에 상관없이 대우한다
3. Sees serving as a mission of responsibility to others
   임무의 일환으로 사람들을 대우한다.
4. Is genuinely interested in employees as people
   고용인을 인간적으로 대우한다

5. Understands that serving others is most important
   사람들을 섬기는 것을 가장 중요하게 여긴다.

6. Is willing to make sacrifices to help others
   사람들을 돕기위해 자진해서 희생한다

7. Seeks to instill trust rather than fear or insecurity
   권위적이고 강압적이 아닌 신뢰할 수 있는 환경을 조성한다

8. Is always honest
   항상 정직하다.

9. Is driven by a sense of higher calling
   리더의 소명에 따르도록 추진하다.

10. Promotes values that transcend self-interest and material success
    물질적 성공이나 사리사욕이 아닌 그것들을 능가하는 가치를 지지
    한다

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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