



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND LIFE SATISFACTION

The Mediating Role of Justice, Job Control, and Burnout

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When it comes to identifying and meeting the psychological needs of people in an organization, it is servant-leadership that emphasizes this aspect most, more than any other leadership theory. Servant-leadership theory positions the leader as worker-centered, personal growth-oriented, and focused on providing a sense of purpose. This holistic approach to leadership helps people find an intrinsic satisfaction in their job by emphasizing their sense of work as a calling (Correia de Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2010). It promotes a sense of community, empowerment, and autonomy. It is, therefore, to be expected that the influence of servant-leadership extends beyond the direct work environment toward life satisfaction in general. In this paper, we will test a model that presupposes that servant-leadership is related to life satisfaction through creating a culture of justice and by giving job control to workers, which together is related to less burnout.

Life satisfaction can be defined as an overall global judgment of a person's quality of life (Pavot & Diener, 1993). It emphasizes the extent that the positive side of life has been met according to a person's own standards of evaluation. There is abundant evidence that one's experience at work is strongly related to one's overall judgment of life (Rain, Lane, & Steiner, 1991). We propose three key mediating processes through which servant-leaders encourage life satisfaction: (1) justice (2) job control, and (3) burnout. Previous studies have provided strong evidence that leadership support is related to less employee burnout. Additionally, the extent to which a



leader is capable of establishing a working environment that is perceived as fair and gives a sense of autonomy is an important factor in facilitating less stress and burnout.

As a first step to understanding the processes underlying our model, we propose that servant-leadership behavior is beneficial for lower levels of job burnout. Burnout is generally viewed as a long-term stress reaction. It is a metaphor that refers to the draining of energy and loss of motivation (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Given the central role of leaders in the social setting of most organizations, the behavior shown by leaders toward their followers plays an important role in how supportive a work setting is perceived. There is abundant evidence that a controlling, less supportive leadership style, where responsibilities are not clarified and feedback is lacking, is related to lower levels of well-being, and higher levels of stress and burnout (Van Dierendonck et al., 2004). Given its chronic character, it can be expected that the effects of burnout will transfer from the work context to life in general. The lack of energy and motivation that accompanies higher levels of burnout is therefore hypothesized to link toward lower levels of life satisfaction.

To further understand the relation between leadership and life satisfaction through burnout, we propose that organizational justice will play a central role. Organizational justice has been defined as a combination of the fairness of the procedures used by leaders to determine outcome distributions or allocations, and the fairness of outcome distributions or allocations (Colquitt et al., 2001). In relation to leadership, it has been found that global perception of supervisory fairness is significantly related to anticipated justice (Rodell and Colquitt, 2009). Servant-leaders are supposed to let their employees grow and feel good in the organization (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Not surprisingly, servant leadership has been found to be significantly related to a procedural justice climate (Ehrhart, 2004). Relatedly, a general sense of organizational justice is therefore expected to have a positive influence on the relationship between servant-leadership and burnout.

Job control is positioned as an essential element linking work conditions to worker well-being in Karasek's (1995) job demand-control model. It is also called decision latitude and focuses on the freedom to use one's skills at work and the autonomy to make one's own decision how to perform a task. It has been positioned as an important element to reduce the stress that may come from the demands at work. Literature on servant leadership behaviors states that it focuses on the needs of others and on developing employees to their fullest potential, among others in the area



of task effectiveness. Therefore, it is likely servant-leadership will do so by—among other things—creating working conditions that allow a sense of freedom and control, in which one is likely to achieve a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind with less stress and burnout.

METHOD

Participants

The cross-sectional data for this study was gathered through a postal questionnaire survey as a part of a national well-being study initiated by the Supreme Court of Finland. The study was aimed at every judge working in Finnish general courts at the time of the data collection ($n = 707$). Altogether, 550 judges responded to the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 78 percent. The data was representative of Finnish judges working in district courts, the courts of appeal, and the Supreme Court. Of the participants, 55.5 percent were male, the mean age was 53.5 years ($SD = 8.47$) and the average number of years employed in present tasks was 11.4 ($SD = 9.9$).

Measures

Servant-leadership was measured using the eight dimensions included in the Servant-Leadership Survey developed by van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011). The eight dimensions are; empowerment (7 items, $\alpha = .88$), accountability (3 items, $\alpha = .79$), standing back (3 items, $\alpha = .78$), humility (5 items, $\alpha = .91$), authenticity (4 items, $\alpha = .73$), courage (2 items, $\alpha = .75$), forgiveness (3 items, $\alpha = .85$), and stewardship (3 items, $\alpha = .77$). A six-point Likers scale was used ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Justice was measured using the four item scale ($\alpha = 0.85$) from the COPSOQ (Kristensen et al., 2005; e.g., “Are conflicts resolved in a fair way”), rated on a five-point scale from 1 (never/very rarely) to 5 (very often).

Job control was measured with Karasek’s (1985) scales of skill discretion and decision latitude. Skill discretion ($\alpha = .62$) included three and decision latitude ($\alpha = .71$) five items (e.g., “My job allows me to make a lot of decisions on my own”). The items were scored on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

Burnout was assessed by the Finnish version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory—General survey (Kalimo et al., 2006). It includes three scales



characterizing the syndrome: *Exhaustion* (5 items, $\alpha = .91$) refers to feelings of strain, particularly chronic fatigue resulting from overtaxing work; *Cynicism* (5 items, $\alpha = .80$) refers to an indifferent or a distant attitude toward work in general and the people with whom one works, losing one's interest in work, and feeling that work has lost its meaning; *Lack of professional efficacy* (6 items, $\alpha = .84$) refers to reduced feelings of competence, successful achievement, and accomplishment both in one's job and the organization.

Life satisfaction was measured using the five item scale ($\alpha = 0.90$) by Pavot and Diener (1993) (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to the ideal"). The items were scored on a seven-point rating scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Statistical analyses

We employed Structural Equation (SEM) techniques and Amos 16.0 software to test the hypothesized model. We used latent variables as indicated by their respective scales (servant-leadership, job control, and burnout) or items (justice and life satisfaction) in the study models. We used the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) as an absolute goodness-of-fit index, and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Normed Fit Index (NFI) as relative fit indices. RMSEA values smaller than .05 are indicative of a good fit, whereas values greater than 0.1 should lead to model rejection (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). For CFI and NFI, values greater than .90 (and preferably greater than .95) are considered to indicate a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All model comparisons were based on chi-square difference tests and inspecting fit indices. In addition, we used bootstrapping to investigate the indirect effects of servant-leadership on life satisfaction.

Prior to testing the hypothesized mediated model we tested the measurement model that defines the relations between all observed and unobserved study variables. The measurement model showed reasonable fit to the data ($\chi^2 (199) = 604.18$, CFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.90, and RMSEA = 0.063). However, the modification indices suggested to allow correlations between two pairs of sub-dimensions in the servant leadership factor, namely between courage and forgiveness, and between standing back and forgiveness. After adding these error correlations the measurement model had an even better fit to the data ($\chi^2 (197) = 525.32$, CFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.92, and RMSEA = 0.057).

Table 1.

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables among Finnish judges (N = 550).

Variables			1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
	M	Sd															
1. Empowerment	4.02	.96	-														
2. Accountability	4.92	.70	.31	-													
3. Standing back	3.65	1.00	.55	.20	-												
4. Humility	3.19	1.18	.69	.24	.66	-											
5. Authenticity	3.38	.92	.60	.20	.51	.69	-										
6. Courage	3.57	1.01	.35	.09	.26	.28	.36	-									
7. Forgiveness	4.49	1.11	.48	.20	.55	.56	.30	-.02	-								
8. Stewardship	4.03	1.04	.70	.32	.50	.70	.58	.39	.39	-							
9. Justice	3.36	.79	.63	.23	.45	.53	.47	.23	.42	.57	-						
10. Decision authority	4.11	.70	.16	.23	.03	.08	.09	-.07	.11	.03	.24	-					
11. Skill discretion	4.14	.48	.26	.25	.07	.12	.10	.08	.07	.15	.22	.34	-				
12. Exhaustion	1.40	1.18	-.10	.00	-.07	-.04	-.04	.07	-.16	-.02	-.26	-.26	-.11	-			
13. Cynicism	1.29	1.17	-.15	-.09	-.06	-.11	-.10	-.05	-.12	-.15	-.27	-.20	-.24	.49	-		
14. Reduced professional efficacy	1.43	1.03	-.24	-.12	-.12	-.18	-.16	-.11	-.11	-.18	-.33	-.28	-.33	.39	.37	-	
15. Life satisfaction	5.12	1.18	.22	.17	.12	.12	.09	.05	.15	.14	.26	.30	.27	-.45	-.41	-.47	-

Note. Correlations > .17 are statistically significant, $p < .001$; correlations between .13 – .17 are statistically significant, $p < .01$; correlations between .10 – .12 are statistically significant, $p < .05$.



RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and the correlations between the study variables. among Finnish judges.

The Hypothesized Model

The hypothesized fully mediated model (M1) in which servant-leadership was assumed to be positively related to both justice and job control, which in turn were expected to be negatively associated with burnout, which finally was hypothesized to be negatively related to life satisfaction, had a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2(201) = 491.86$, CFI = 0.93, NFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.92, and RMSEA = 0.061). In the next step, we compared M1 with two partially mediated models. In the first partially mediated model we added to M1 the direct paths from servant-leadership to burnout and life satisfaction. Adding these direct effects did not improve the model fit compared with M1 ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 0.942$, *ns.*). In the second partially mediated model, we included to M1 two direct paths from both job control and justice to life satisfaction. Neither did this alternative model improve the model fit ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 3.74$, *ns.*). Thus, we found support for the fully mediated model.

The best-fitting model is depicted in Figure 1. The model shows that servant-leadership is positively associated particularly with justice (st. $\beta = 0.74$) but also with job control (st. $\beta = 0.21$). Both justice (st. $\beta = -0.21$) and job control (st. $\beta = -0.55$) were in turn negatively related to burnout. Finally, burnout was negatively associated with life satisfaction (st. $\beta = -0.68$).

In order to test the significance of the indirect effects and confirm the hypothesized mediated model, the recommended procedure in SEM is bootstrapping (e.g., Shrout & Bolger, 2002; Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008). We created one thousand bootstrap samples to test the hypothesized indirect relationship between servant-leadership and life satisfaction. The analysis showed that servant-leadership had an indirect effect through justice, job control, and burnout on life satisfaction (st. est. 0.21, $p < .01$). Finally, the model explained 46 percent of the variance of burnout and 52 percent of the variance of life satisfaction.

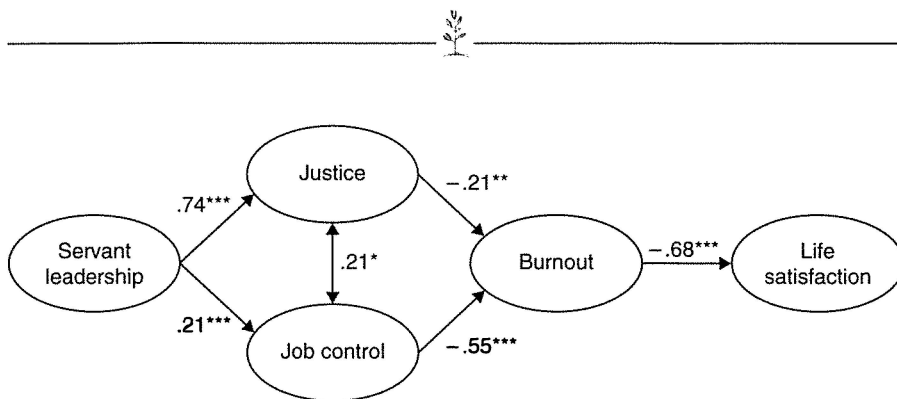


Figure 1. The final model with statistically significant relationships. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to broaden the empirical evidence of the potential beneficial influence of servant-leadership in terms of life in general and show the possible mediating processes through which this influence takes place. Overall, our model showed that indeed servant leadership is strongly related to a sense of justice and job control; which together with diminishing feelings of burnout is related to more life satisfaction. The model testing supported the use of Van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) servant-leadership instrument within a Finnish context. It contributes to the servant-leadership literature by linking it to the area of stress and well-being.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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