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Removing the Mask: Exploring the Relationship between Servant Leadership and Conformity

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ABSTRACT

Conformity plays a fundamental role in creating consistency and minimizing disharmony within organizations. In addition, there are aspects of nonconformity that increase authenticity, reduce burnout, and promote innovation. Conformity is rooted in social influence and implies that individuals naturally look to leaders for group identity. Leaders are also often responsible for the integration of followers and the establishment of organizational standards. Because of this, there is value in understanding how Servant Leadership (SL) behaviors might influence conformity. This paper will provide insight into the relationship between followers' perception of SL and levels of Conformity.

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Introduction

Research is relatively new to exploring the depths of Servant Leadership (SL), its full potential, and application compared to other documented leadership styles. As of late, there is no widely accepted model or measure for SL. However, existing research finds SL as the optimal leadership style for creating an organization rich in human capital development and making an organization a preferred workplace (Barbuto & Gottfredson, 2016). SL establishes the idea of service embedded within the leader-follower relationship (van Dierendock & Nuijten, 2011). Servant leaders aim to serve the highest priority needs of followers; they often achieve this by positively impacting growth, promoting "healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous" followers, which as a result, become servants themselves. (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 66).

These are all essential aspects of a servant leader; this leads us to discuss the role of leader-follower relationships and follower conformity. SL implies freedom and autonomy; however, social influence naturally encourages followers to conform in an attempt to fit in. Because of this, researchers should consider directing attention to the investigation of the servant leaders' role in follower perceptions of conforming.

Drawing parallels to leadership, social influence has long been a topic of inquiry amongst social science researchers. Based on the existing literature, there is consensus that four distinct types of social influence exist: compliance, conformity, obedience, and persuasion. Of the four, conformity is the only passive type of influence where influence occurs subtly. The other influences are considered active types (Fabrigar & Norris, 2012), where influence occurs directly. Conceptually, active influence is anytime an individual recognizes that they are being urged to respond in the desired way (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Passive influence is an individual submitting to someone else with minimal action from the influencer.

There were two types of conformity influences considered for this study: informational influence and

normative influence. Informational influence occurs when individuals use the attitudes or actions of those around them as cues to correcting their behavior. Normative influence occurs when individuals conform publicly without necessarily believing such behavior is correct (Smith, 2010). Informational and normative influences are interrelated but are empirically and theoretically challenging to separate. (David & Turner, 2001) Studies show that though interdependent, both are two distinct types of conformity influences. Both informational and normative influences apply to all aspects of conformity discussed in this research; however, normative influence is the central idea behind the types of conformity discussed.

Individuals, in general, have a belief system, but some beliefs are not necessarily hard-wired to the person. Individuals can transfer their views to their contacts. The receiver of a transferred belief can accept the incoming notion or reject it. The choice to accept or reject is based on the context of the receivers' belief system, also known as internal coherency, or similarity to the receiver's neighbors, known as social conformity. Social pressure may also increase the odds of belief acceptance, even if adverse to the individual's belief system (Rodriguez, Bollen, & Ahn, 2016). This natural transfer of ideology plays a vital role in organizations and leader-follower relationships as nonconformity is often identified as a signal of someone with 'extreme preferences.' Therefore, conforming may become a preferred option because conformity, while costly, leads to improved treatment by others (Kreps, 1997).

The two types of conformity discussed are Surface Acting (SA) and Facades of Conformity (FOC). SA is suppressing one's authentic self in favor of an emotional mask. It is the behavior guided by organizational norms or a display of emotions central to role performance. It often causes a conflict between expressed emotions and actual feelings (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). FOC is a false representation created by individuals to appear to embrace organizational values (Hewlin, 2009). These two concepts

represent types of conformity, more commonly seen as those who wear emotional masks and act or pretend at work.

Theory and Hypotheses

We expect leaders to be the natural source for teaching organizational values to subordinates (Lord & Brown, 2001). Leaders also play a vital role in establishing organizational norms, processes, and practices. Leaders must practice inclusiveness to minimize conformity that hinders creative innovation, diversification, and challenging the status quo. It is also vital to maintain harmony and functionality that conformity can provide. Though the core values of SL promote a fair balance of both, the question arises if followers embrace these values wholly. Does SL promote inclusiveness within a group of individuals with varying needs, emotions, ideas, and beliefs, or do followers feel the need to present a facade to maintain harmony?

Hypothesis 1: Is there a relationship between Servant Leadership (Accountability, Empowerment, Standing Back, Humility, Authenticity, Courage, Interpersonal Acceptance, Stewardship), and the followers self-reported Surface Acting when controlling for Gender, Age, and Tenure?

Hypothesis 2: Is there a relationship between Servant Leadership (Accountability, Empowerment, Standing Back, Humility, Authenticity, Courage, Interpersonal Acceptance, and Stewardship) and the follower's self-reported Facades of Conformity when controlling for Gender, Age, and Tenure.

Method

Sample and Procedure

This study used a convenience sample of employed individuals aged 18 years and older who reported to any person considered to be a boss, manager, supervisor, director, etc. Participants were asked to complete an online survey to measure their perception of their leaders' Servant Leadership, participant levels of Surface Acting, and participant levels of Facades of Conformity. There were 711 total responses collected; however, only 564 were complete responses, generating a completion rate of 79.32%.

Measures

Servant Leadership (SL)

This study assessed the participants' perception of their leader's Servant leadership behaviors using the 30 item *Servant Leadership Scale* (SLS) developed by van Dierendonck & Nuijten (2011). The SLS measured eight dimensions of Servant leadership. A six-point Likert scale was used to measure all items (1=strongly disagree";

6="strongly agree"). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale ranged from .69 to .91.

Surface Acting (SA)

The *Surface Acting Scale* was borrowed from the Emotional Labour Scale by Brotheridge and Lee. (2003) was used to measure levels of surface acting. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure all items (1="never"; 5="always"). The Cronbach alpha for surface acting was .85.

Facades of Conformity Scale (FOC)

The *Facades of Conformity* scale by Hewlin (2009) was utilized to measure participant levels of facades of conformity. A six-point Likert scale was used to measure the level of withholding values that differ from those of the organization majority (1 = "never; 5 = "always"). The Cronbach alpha for surface acting was .83.

Based on prior research, gender, age, and tenure were used as control variables (Patras, Martinez-Tur, Garcia, & Moliner, 2017; Bhowmick & Mulla, 2016; Gao, Janssen & Shi, 2011; Yan & Xiao, 2016; Hewlin, Dumas, & Burnett, 2017; Hewlin, Kim & Song, 2016)

Results

Means, Standard Deviation, and Correlation

See Table 2 for means, standard deviations, and correlations. Male participants were 52% of the sample. The average follower age was 32 years. The average tenure was about five years.

According to the findings, a negative significant correlation was found between SL, Empowerment and SA ($r = -.258, p < .001$), SL, Standing Back and SA ($r = -.178, p < .001$), SL, Accountability and SA ($r = -.165, p < .001$), SL, Interpersonal Acceptance and SA ($r = -.337, p < .001$), SL, Authenticity and SA ($r = -.220, p < .001$), SL, Humility and SA ($r = -.207, p < .001$), SL, Stewardship and SA ($r = -.220, p < .001$). All findings show that 7 out of 8 dimensions of SL and SA influence each other.

According to the findings, a negative significant correlation was found between SL, Empowerment and FOC ($r = -.248, p < .001$), SL, Standing Back and FOC ($r = -.152, p < .001$), SL, Accountability and FOC ($r = -.179, p < .001$), SL, Interpersonal Acceptance and FOC ($r = -.361, p < .001$), SL, Authenticity and FOC ($r = -.142, p < .001$), SL, Humility and FOC ($r = -.155, p < .001$), SL, Stewardship and FOC ($r = -.181, p < .001$). All findings show that 7 out of 8 dimensions of SL and FOC exert some influence on each other.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among our key variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.Gender	0.48	0.5												
2.Age	32.98	9.5	.210**											
3.Tenure	5.49	3.84	0.073	.470**										
4.Surface Acting	2.67	0.94	0.014	-.199**	-.121**									
5.Facades of Conformity	2.79	0.77	-0.089	-.199**	-.162	.624**								
6.Empowement	4.32	1.08	-.057	0.017	0.034	-2.58**	-.248**							
7.Standing Back	4.04	1.14	-1.22**	-.064	-0.012	-.178**	-.152**	.695**						
8.Accountability	4.87	0.84	.144**	.263**	.155**	-.165**	-.179**	.399**	.222**					
9.Interpersonal Acceptance	3.37	1.35	.143**	.226**	.135**	-.337**	-.361**	.245**	.180**	.173**				
10.Courage	4.02	1.14	-.161*	-0.079	-0.052	-0.071	-0.019	.457**	.456**	.115**	-.153**			
11.Authenticity	4.11	1.02	-.144**	0.006	0.037	-.220**	-.142**	.637**	.662**	.222**	.088**	.516**		
12.Humility	4.16	1.12	-.140**	-0.051	-0.016	-.207**	-.155**	.707**	.731**	.249**	.249**	.510**	.743**	
13.Stewardship	4.41	1.07	-.095*	0.025	0	-.220**	-.181**	.684**	.636**	.328**	.261**	.471**	.651**	.763**

n = 564

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; two-tailed tests

Table 3. Direct Effects of SL on SA.

Model	R	R ²	ΔR^2	β	rp	df	Sig.
1. SA: Age	.199	.040		-.199		(1, 562)	.000
2. SA: Interpersonal Acceptance	.360	.129	.09	-.307	-.305	(1, 561)	.000
3. SA: Authenticity	.408	.166	.037	-.194	-.207	(1, 560)	.000
4. SA: Empowerment	.416	.173	.007	-.110	-.090	(1, 559)	.033

Table 4. Direct Effects of SL on FOC.

Model	R	R ²	ΔR^2	β	rp	df	Sig.
5. FOC: Age	.199	.039		-.199		(1, 562)	.000
6. FOC: Interpersonal Acceptance	.360	.145	.105	-.333	-.331	(1, 561)	.000
7. FOC: Empowerment	.416	.173	.029	-.175	-.183	(1, 560)	.000

Results of Hypothesis Related to Direct Effects

In the stepwise regression analysis, age accounted for 4% of the variance explained ($R^2 = .040$, $\beta = -.199$, $p < .000$). Interpersonal Acceptance accounted for an additional 9% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .09$, $\beta = -.307$, $rp = -.305$, $p < .000$), authenticity accounted for an additional 3.7% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .037$, $\beta = -.194$, $rp = -.207$, $p < .000$), and empowerment accounted for an additional .07% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .007$, $\beta = -.110$, $rp = -.090$, $p < .033$).

In summary, age, interpersonal acceptance, authenticity, and empowerment are negative predictors of Surface Acting; as scores for each increase, levels of surface acting decrease; therefore, null hypothesis H_{01} is rejected.

The regression analysis results for Servant Leadership and Facades of Conformity are in Table 4.

In the stepwise regression analysis, age accounted for 3.9% of variance explained ($R^2 = .039$, $\beta = -.199$, $p < .000$), interpersonal acceptance accounted for an additional 10.5% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .105$, $\beta = -.333$, $rp = -.331$, $p < .000$), and empowerment accounted for an additional 2.9% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .029$, $\beta = -.175$, $rp = -.183$, $p < .000$).

In summary, age, interpersonal acceptance, and empowerment are negative predictors of Surface Acting; as scores for each increase, levels of surface acting decrease; therefore, null hypothesis H_{02} is rejected.

Discussion

This study confirms a negative relationship between SA and empowering, standing back, accountability, interpersonal acceptance, authenticity, humility, and stewardship SL behavior. No significant relationship was found between SA and the courage SL behavior.

In addition, this study confirms a negative relationship between FOC and the empowering, standing back, accountability, interpersonal acceptance, authenticity, humility, and stewardship SL behaviors. There was no significant correlation found between FOC and courage SL behavior.

The definition of interpersonal acceptance is empathy and the ability to forgive. This core dimension fosters a level of trust in the leader-follower dynamic and tends to bring out the best in people. Study findings link interpersonal acceptance to surface acting and facades of conformity, indicating that empathetic and forgiving leaders can reduce emotional masks and false representations presented by followers. Individuals feeling judged are also more likely to conform; therefore, leaders rated higher in interpersonal acceptance may be less judgmental and more empathetic to feelings and behaviors. In this case, followers may feel safe expressing their true feelings without fear of rejection or punishment.

Empowerment is the encouragement and enablement of personal development, which can foster personal power and

self-confidence. Empowerment and conformity can pair together since individuals with feelings of empowerment often disturb generally accepted behaviors and practices in place of conforming. The aspect of empowerment affecting facades of conformity tends to be more psychological than that defined by van Dierendonck and Nuijten's (2011) study as fostering a pro-active, self-confident attitude among followers and giving them a sense of personal power. Because of this, leaders should be mindful that there are many layers to empowerment. There are four cognitions of psychological empowerment: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. It appears that self-determination may be the main factor in whether an individual engages in surface acting or presenting a facade. The second deciding factor is the impact and if the individual feels their behaviors make a difference in work outcomes.

Grandey, Foo, Groth, and Goodwin (2012) presented findings where authenticity amongst peers minimized the negative effect of emotional labor (surface acting). This study supports the literature in finding a relationship between perceived leader authenticity and follower surface acting in addition to authenticity being a predictor. The presentation of a leaders' "authentic self" can be used to promote follower trust. However, often leaders distort their "authentic self" by attempting to minimize displays of inappropriate or negative emotions. This display may be why authenticity was found to be a minor predictor of surface acting.

The demographic variable age has a weak relationship with both surface acting which adds a data point to the existing literature. Age, however, was able to predict a small percentage of facades of conformity. Research indicates that this may be due to the relationship between age and experience. Data shows that older individuals tend to have more experience and feel secure in their expressions. In comparison, younger individuals may present more facades of conformity until they gain enough experience or confidence in their profession or organization.

The demographic variables gender and tenure did not yield significant results with Surface Acting or Facades of Conformity for this study, further validating existing literature.

Implications

Servant Leadership, at its best, should be a valuable relational experience that encourages the expression of true inner feelings instead of fake or masked emotions and behaviors. The negative relationships found between Servant Leadership dimensions and conformity provides further evidence of this. This study considers the overall role of the Servant leader and delves into each core dimension of servant leadership to isolate specific behaviors of Servant leadership that might affect the followers' level of conformity.

The identified Servant Leadership behavior in this study provides insight into where improvements can be made to minimize follower SA and FOC in addition to adverse outcomes such as job insecurity, burnout, and conflict aversion. Leaders must be attentive to engagement in SA and FOC by creating an empowering environment where leaders practice high levels of personal acceptance and humility, which may reduce follower masking induced by individual and organizational value misalignment through encouraging true expression.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between eight core servant leadership behaviors and conformity using the SA and FOC survey instruments while controlling for participant gender, age, and tenure. As individuals look toward leadership for definitions of organizational identity, organizational values, and establishing organizational norms, we must be mindful of conformity's impact within organizations. Since conformity is rooted in social influence, it plays a vital role within organizations due to the need for consistency and preventing disharmony, which in essence, becomes an extension of an individual. While core values of Servant leadership tend to promote inclusiveness, sensitivity, growth, and placing others first, it is essential to expand knowledge of how leader behaviors translate to follower conformity. Leaders must minimize the negative aspects of conformity, which hinders innovation and may cause burnout.

Future Directions

This study does not consider varying organizational norms, sources of power, level of social influence, or punishment mechanisms set in place to sustain levels of conformity in organizations. For instance, an organization may require a business casual dress code where one must conform to be employed. While some prefer to wear jeans and a t-shirt, they would naturally conform to maintain employment.

Sources of power and social impact may also play a role in managing conformity with compliance or obedience versus fostering a reduction of masked feelings and emotions. Understanding these factors could make it easier to differentiate between different types of active and passive social influences that create conformity. This study does not control for levels of social impact within an organization, which could account for higher or lower levels of conformity based on the strength, immediacy, and numbers of influence or the strength of the individual exposed. Similar to the strength of social influence, the level of social impact could explain how an individual may or may not conform based on their ability to influence others. A simple demonstration is the use of a hierarchy where employees have supervisors; supervisors have managers, managers have directors, directors have vice presidents, etc. As an underlying assumption, one would generally think that those in non-supervisory roles would naturally conform because they are at the lowest level of the hierarchy. At the same time, a director would be less likely to conform because they influence to change the environment around them versus conforming to it.

Human behavior should also be examined to understand the levels of conformity regarding ethical norms, harmful norms, and the strength of individual beliefs in addition to follower personality traits such as openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism which may contribute to levels of own conformity. For example, an agreeable individual may tend to

go along with things without feeling as if they are conforming. This idea is similar to open individuals being more receptive to change from within versus surface acting or creating a facade.

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