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Testing a Servant Leadership Theory Among United States Military Members

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Servant leadership, first proposed by Greenleaf (1970), is an emergent leadership theory postulating a leader must serve first. Patterson (2003), building on transformational and previous servant leadership research, developed a model of servant leading based on the following: (a) agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service. This study tests Patterson's theory of servant leadership in a military context by investigating the relationship between the seven constructs in Patterson's servant leadership model. Multi-rank and service military members' perception of servant leaders was assessed using the servant leadership instrument developed by Dennis and Bocarnea (2005). Patterson's servant leadership model was supported by the study. The study pioneers servant leadership research in the military.

Servant Leadership in the Military

Servant leadership, first proposed by Greenleaf (1970), is an emergent leadership theory postulating that a leader must serve first. As discussed by Yukl (2002) "a servant leader must attend to the needs of followers and help them become healthier, wiser and more willing to accept their responsibilities" (p. 424). In other words, a servant leader places the needs of the followers above the leader's own personal interests. As an emerging theory, servant leadership has been the subject of few studies (Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Irving & Longbotham, 2007; Joseph & Winston, 2005; Laub, 1999; Patterson, 2003; Russell, 2001; Russell & Stone, 2002; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Winston, 2004). In an effort to address a gap in servant leadership theory, Patterson, building on the foundation of transformational and previous servant research, developed a model of servant leading based on the following: (a) agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service. Patterson's servant

leadership model still requires testing in varied contexts as only a few studies (Bryant, 2003; Dillman, 2004; Dingman, 2006; Koshal, 2005; Nelson, 2003; Serrano, 2006) have tested Patterson's theory. It is therefore useful to investigate Patterson's servant leadership model in the military context. This research was carried out by utilizing Dennis & Bocarnea's (2005) Servant Leadership Assessment Instrument to further test Patterson's assertions.

Literature Review

Servant leadership, as well as transformational leadership, has received significant attention in the academe in recent years as an alternative leadership theory, particularly with the focus on the leader-follower relationship being "central to ethical leadership" (Northouse, 2001, p. 257). Transformational leadership, developed by Burns and servant leadership introduced by Greenleaf has roots in charismatic leadership (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004). Servant leadership emerged from transformational leadership and they are similar in scope, although transformational leadership's focus is the primary benefit of the leader, while servant leadership's focus is on the benefit of the follower (Farling et al., 1999). This distinction has been the focus of a study by Parolini (2007) who discovered five major distinctions between transformational and servant leadership including: (a) focus on the individual or organizational needs, (b) inclination to lead or serve, (c) allegiance and focus toward individual or organization, (d) conventional or unconventional approach to influence, and (e) attempt to give or control freedom through influence and persuasion. As the literature (Farling et al.; Parolini; Stone et al., 2004; Washington, 2007; Whetstone, 2002) supports a distinction between transformational and servant leadership, the need arose for a separate model for servant leadership. Patterson (2003) developed a model of servant leading based on the following: (a) agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service discussed below.

Agapao Love

Patterson (2003) originated the idea of agapao love for her model of servant leadership. As stated by Patterson, "This love is shown by leaders who consider each person as a total-person-one with needs, wants and desires" (p. 8). Furthermore, Williams (2004) stated when speaking of this form of love, that it is "patient, kind, demonstrates humility, respectfulness, selflessness, forgiveness, honesty, and commitment" (p. 8). Agapao love in practice in an organization involves the leader gaining influence through service of the employee (Russell & Stone, 2002) and placing the importance of the employee over the organization (Patterson). As stated by Gomez (2004) "the servant leader is a person who desires to sacrifice themselves out of love for others" (p. 148). Finally, Stone et al. (2004) described the servant leader, one who possesses agapao love, as one who does not hold "a particular affinity for the abstract corporation or organization: rather, they value the people who constitute the organization. This is not an emotional endeavor but rather an unconditional concern for the well being of those who form the entity" (p. 355).

Humility

Humility, according to Button (2005), is to lower one's status in relation to another and is related to one's own self-awareness. Humility is not about someone who lacks self-esteem, but

rather someone who recognizes their own standing and is unassuming and humble (Bower, 1997). Patterson (2003) saw humility as a virtue that rejects self-glorification; further postulating that a person who possesses humility cannot esteem themselves therefore, maintaining a diminished self-focus. Kallasvuo (2007) further described humility as one of service to the organization and a vital quality of a leader. Fairholm and Fairholm (2000) agreed that humility is a vital part of leadership stating “self-interest plays no part in leadership, except as a counterpoint to the sense of self-worth that service to others engenders” (p. 105). Humility, allows leaders to see beyond their own ambitions and recognize the value of the follower to an organization (Winston, 2003).

Altruism

Altruism is seen by Patterson (2003) as a link between good motives and good behavior. Karra, Tracey, and Phillips (2006) defined altruism as “a moral value that leads individuals to act in the interests of others without expectation of reward or positive reinforcement in return” (p. 863). Thompson (2007) further defined altruism as total unselfish concern for others, a form of self denial. According to Scruton (2007), altruism ranges from performing unselfish acts to sacrificing one’s life for another, such as “the lioness who dies in defense of her cubs” (p. 39). Berry and Cartwright (2000) linked altruism and servant leadership by stating that “it seeks a radical equality of persons by requiring all to be servants for some greater good than the individual’s ego” (p. 342).

Vision

Patterson (2003) referred to vision as the “idea that the leader looks forward and sees the person as a viable and worthy person, believes in the future state of each individual, and seeks to assist each one in reaching that state” (p. 18). In servant leadership, a leader is a designer, steward, and teacher vested in each individual for the purpose of growing the individual within the organization (Taylor, 2007). Vision is seen as a way to “inspire others, to motivate action and to move with hope toward the future” (Farling et al., 1999, p. 53). Though Winston (2003) disagreed with Patterson’s use of the term vision, he described Patterson’s view when he stated, “Vision is worked out by the leader finding the various interests and goals of the employee as it relates to what the follower wants to do and the leader then modifies the organization’s procedures and methods to fit” (p. 3).

Trust

Fairholm and Fairholm (2000) described trust as essential to an organization and a key element for the leader and follower to unite around, “If unity is not achieved leadership degenerates into management and control, power politics and compromise” (p. 102). Gomez (2004) further stated that servant leaders elicit trust in the follower by “responding to crisis by owning the problem” (p. 149). Russell (2001) and Story (2002) agreed that integrity and trust leads to credibility and is essential to servant leadership, while Omoh (2007) stressed mutual trust between leader and follower. Patterson (2003) viewed trust as a way for the leader to empower to follower and the organization. Winston (2003) suggested that vision and trust occur concurrently in Patterson’s model.

Empowerment

Russell (2001) viewed empowerment as the essential element of servant leadership and is a major goal of the leader. Russell and Stone (2002) affirmed that empowerment is achieved through pulling rather than pushing individuals along. Farling et al. (1999) stated that servant leader's values are what empower followers. Patterson (2003) stated that empowerment is "letting people do their jobs by enabling them to learn, grow and progress and it means allowing for self direction and freedom to fail; all of this multiplies the followers' strengths and trust" (p. 24). Patterson further stated that this allows the follower to make their dreams a reality. Winston (2003) clarified that the freedom is not limitless but is "progressive with the new follower being empowered in small amounts and allowing the follower to learn and grow to the point of being capable and willing to handle larger levels of empowerment" (p. 4).

Service

Farling et al. (1999) concluded that service is an essential element to servant leadership and service is a primary function of leadership. Russell and Stone (2002) and Winston (2003) further explained that leaders emulate a service model for followers. Patterson's (2003) model states that "the servant leader is called to serve and see life as a mission of service, and this calling to service induces an acceptance of responsibility for others" (p. 25). The servant leader is commanded to serve their employees and is committed to their well-being. Spears (1995) commented that "great leaders must first serve others, and that this simple fact is central to his or her greatness" (p. 3).

Patterson's Servant Leadership Model

Figure 1 outlines Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model concepts from agapao love to service. The model illustrates the role of the leader and how agapao love begins the process, works through humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and ends with service. This, according to Winston (2003), is incomplete as the model only addresses the leader's relationship to the follower.

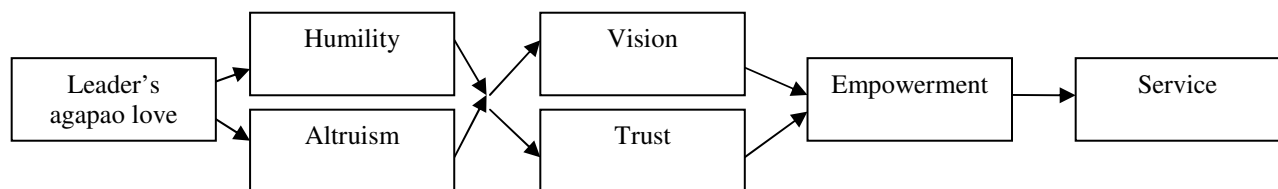


Figure 1. Patterson's (2003) Servant Leadership Model.

Servant Leadership Model Research Hypotheses

The main purpose of this study is to add to the body of knowledge on servant leadership by testing the causal relationships of Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model and validating Patterson's constructs of servant leadership in the military context. Based on the literature review, six research hypotheses (H) were used to explore servant leadership:

- H₁: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her humility.
 H₂: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her altruism.
 H₃: A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to his or her vision for the followers.
 H₄: A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to the leader's trust in the follower.
 H₅: A leader's vision and trust are positively related to his or her empowerment of the followers.
 H₆: A leader's empowerment of the followers is positively related to the leader's service to the followers.

Additionally, the following research questions (RQ) were asked concerning the role of gender, military rank, and military service on the servant leadership concepts. Military rank was subdivided among the rank structure delineated in Table 4. Finally, military service comprised of all five military services: (a) Air Force, (b) Navy, (c) Army, (d) Marine Corps, and (e) Coast Guard.

- RQ_{1.1}: Is there a difference in agapao love by gender?
 RQ_{1.2}: Is there a difference in humility by gender?
 RQ_{1.3}: Is there a difference in altruism by gender?
 RQ_{1.4}: Is there a difference in vision by gender?
 RQ_{1.5}: Is there a difference in trust by gender?
 RQ_{1.6}: Is there a difference in empowerment by gender?
 RQ_{1.7}: Is there a difference in service by gender?
 RQ_{2.1}: Is there a difference in agapao love by rank?
 RQ_{2.2}: Is there a difference in humility by rank?
 RQ_{2.3}: Is there a difference in altruism by rank?
 RQ_{2.4}: Is there a difference in vision by rank?
 RQ_{2.5}: Is there a difference in trust by rank?
 RQ_{2.6}: Is there a difference in empowerment by rank?
 RQ_{2.7}: Is there a difference in service by rank?
 RQ_{3.1}: Is there a difference in agapao love by military service?
 RQ_{3.2}: Is there a difference in humility by military service?
 RQ_{3.3}: Is there a difference in altruism by military service?
 RQ_{3.4}: Is there a difference in vision by military service?
 RQ_{3.5}: Is there a difference in trust by military service?
 RQ_{3.6}: Is there a difference in empowerment by military service?
 RQ_{3.7}: Is there a difference in service by military service?

Method

The methodological approach was quantitative in nature with the main objective being to investigate Patterson's servant leadership model and its casual relationships in the military context. The study was cross-sectional with questionnaires as the primary means of data collection.

Sample

The sample for the research was selected from a Department of Defense facility located in Colorado comprised of all five military branches. The facility was selected for its breadth of experience ranging from first time enlistees to senior personnel. The sample size reflects the composition of the military and is proportionate to the number of service personnel in the facility. Due to the nature of the facility, Air Force and Navy contingents have greater representation through the sample size. A total of 200 military members participated in the study and the ranks and services are delineated in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1
Sample Size by Service

Service	<i>n</i>	Percent
Air Force	75	37.50
Navy	75	37.50
Army	40	20.00
Marines	5	2.50
Coast Guard	5	2.50

Table 2
Rank by Percentage

Service	(n/Percent)	E-1-E-3	E-4-E-6	E-7-E-9	Officer
Air Force	25/33.33	35/46.67	8/10.67	7/9.33	
Navy	25/33.33	35/46.67	8/10.67	7/9.33	
Army	13/32.50	19/47.50	5/12.50	3/7.50	
Marines	2/40.00	2/40.00	0/0.00	1/20.00	
Coast Guard	1/20.00	3/60.00	1/20.00	0/0.00	

Data Collection

Data was collected via a personal distribution method due to the convenience of distribution and the rapid turnaround in data collection. Confidentiality was assured for all participants in the research study. The instrument was disseminated to participants via a service representative and each participant was provided 20 minutes to complete the instrument and return the survey to the service representative. The representative ensured equal distribution of the questionnaire along current military demographics outlined in Tables 1 and 2 above.

Instrument

The instrument chosen for the current study was Dennis and Bocarnea's (2005) servant leadership instrument. The intention of the instrument according to the authors is to have "the ability to predict or give instrument to the concepts of Patterson's theory of servant leadership so that a servant leader can measure his or her effectiveness as a servant leader" (Dennis & Bocarnea, p. 612). With the permission of the authors, demographic information on the instrument was modified to reflect information related to the military. The instrument has been shown to be internally reliable with Alpha reliability coefficients ranging from .89 to .92 (Dennis, 2004) for four factors. Though future research has been suggested by the authors to strengthen the instrument, Dennis and Bocarnea and Irving (2005) have established the validity of the instrument.

Results

In order to test the causal relationships between Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model (hypotheses H₁–H₆), simple and multiple regression analyses were run.

Research Hypothesis

Simple regressions tested hypotheses H₁, H₂, and H₆. The results were as follows: H₁ is supported: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her humility [$R^2 = .46$, $F(1, 199) = 168.96$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$, $\beta = .67$]; H₂ was supported: A leader's agapao love is positively related to his or her altruism [$R^2 = .50$, $F(1, 199) = 205$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$, $\beta = .71$]; H₆ was supported: A leader's empowerment of the followers is positively related to the leader's service to the followers [$R^2 = .20$, $F(1, 199) = 49.86$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$, $\beta = .45$].

Multiple regressions were run to test H₃, H₄, and H₅. The results were as follows: H₃: A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to his or her vision for the followers [$R^2 = .33$, $F(2, 199) = 49.85$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$; $\beta_H = .36$; $p > .05$; $\beta_A = .22$, $p > .05$]; H₄: A leader's humility and altruism are positively related to the leader's trust in his followers [$R^2 = .45$, $F(2, 199) = 80.68$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$, $\beta_H = .42$ $p > .05$; $\beta_A = .32$, $p > .05$]; H₅: A leader's vision and trust are positively related to his or her empowerment of the followers [$R^2 = .48$, $F(2, 199) = 91.41$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$, $\beta_V = .35 > .05$, $\beta_T = .45 > .05$].

Figure 3 presents the results of the causal relationship shown in Patterson's (2003) servant leadership model.

- H₁: $F(1,199) = 168.96$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .46$, $\beta = .67$
 H₂: $F(1,199) = 205$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .50$, $\beta = .71$
 H₃: $F(2,199) = 49.85$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .336$, $\beta_H = .36$, $\beta_A = .22$
 H₄: $F(2,199) = 80.68$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .45$, $\beta_H = .42$, $\beta_A = .32$
 H₅: $F(2,199) = 91.41$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .48$, $\beta_V = .35$, $\beta_T = .45$
 H₆: $F(1,199) = 49.86$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .20$, $\beta = .45$

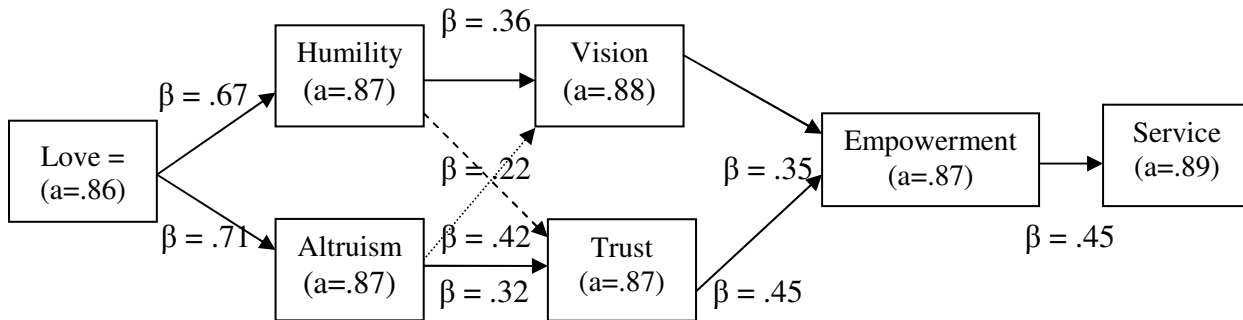


Figure 3. Graphic representation of the results in the tested servant leadership model.

Research Questions

To answer research questions 1.1-1.7, (RQ_{1.1}- RQ_{1.7}: Is there a difference in agapao, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, or service by gender?), *t*-tests were conducted on each of the seven constructs. The results of these tests did not yield significant differences. Research questions 3.1-3.7 (RQ_{3.1}- RQ_{3.7}: Is there a difference in agapao, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, or service by military service?), conducted by an analysis of variance (ANOVA) did not yield significant differences, similar to research question one. Research Questions 2.1-2.7, (RQ_{2.1}- RQ_{1.7}: Is there a difference in agapao, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, or service by rank?), conducted by ANOVA, yielded a significant difference for only the vision construct (RQ_{2.4}) with $F(3,196) = 3.44, p = .01 < .05$.

Summary of Results

To summarize the results of the study for the military context, the causal relationships proposed in Patterson's servant leadership model (2003) were supported. Furthermore, gender and military affiliation were not found to determine differences in servant leadership characteristics. Military rank, however, did have a significant difference for the vision construct. These findings appear to support the portability of the servant leadership theory and add to the body of research in the military context.

Discussion

As proposed by Winston (2004), the Patterson model shows "the causal relationships between the variables in order to build a process model of servant leadership, in moving the literature one step farther" (p. 602) and this study adds support to Patterson's (2003) model. This study validates Patterson's assertion that the constructs of (a) love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, and (g) service exist within the military context. This study further postulates that gender, rank, and military service have no effect on the seven constructs, with the exception of vision and rank. The study is an important addition to servant leadership, as it adds further validity to Patterson's model of servant leadership. As discussed by Joseph and Winston (2005), servant leaders help employees grow through empowering workers, honoring

commitments, and building trust and respect within the workplace. This study adds to the theoretical framework by enhancing the understanding of servant leadership, although the study's intention is not to present servant leadership as the only leadership model available to organizations.

The present study offers numerous directions for future research. Though the current study explores servant leadership within the military, a small cross section of the military was utilized for this current study. Patterson's (2003) theory would be enhanced through exploring a larger cross section of the military through the use of different geographical areas and expanded career fields. Though the current study did ask military officers to participate in the study, the majority of the officers were junior, with very few participants from the senior officer ranks. Patterson's model should be tested in a myriad of organizations and cultures to ensure the theory's portability. Finally, alternate servant leadership models should be tested to unify the understanding of servant leadership.

About the Author

Matthew Earnhardt is working toward a Ph.D. in organizational leadership at Regent University's School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. He currently is a signals analyst for Lockheed Martin Corporation in the Mission Services Division. Additionally, he serves as adjunct faculty and the Business Simulation Coordinator for the Community College of Aurora in Colorado.

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