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1.0 Abstract

The influence of leaders both at individual and team levels and its impact on the organisational moral climate presents a need for improved understanding of ethical aspects of leadership. Nonetheless, the moral development of leaders is not widely acknowledged as a priority in leadership skills even in these challenging times of uncertainty and increase in corporate wrongdoing. More so, leaders are continually faced with moral dilemmas that require appropriate deliberation in view of sustainable productivity. Although the role of ethics and values are an integral part of the extant leadership literature, the field lacks adequate empirical evidence of leaders’ approaches to handling moral issues. In essence, a new instrument would be designed to assess leaders’ moral orientation which will make a meaningful contribution to leadership theory and development. Hence, this paper aims to expand the normative model of servant leadership with specific dimensions of moral reasoning via a quantitative methodology.

Keywords: servant leadership, ethics of care, ethics of justice, moral reasoning orientation

Word Count: 1994
1.1 Introduction

Although moral behaviour in organisations may be guided by policies or codes of conduct, individuals are fundamentally responsible for their own moral behaviour. However, the increase in corporate crime, exemplified by Enron, ImClone and WorldCom (Schminke, et al., 2005), not only questions the extent to which morality is prioritized and suggests that ethics are not an integral element of organisational strategy (White et al., 2001), it also suggests individual failure in moral action on the part of leaders. The moral development of organisational leaders and followers may play a role in improving the ethical stance of organisations in society. However, little is known about the moral reasoning orientation of leaders or the tendency of leaders with different leadership approaches to lean toward one or the other type of reasoning, for example toward a care or a justice orientation. For this reason, this study proposes the design and validation of an instrument tailored to measure the moral reasoning orientation of leaders in order to inform the moral development of leadership professionals. This can also contribute to an ethics-based model that can inform the theory, development, and practice of leadership.

2.0 Rational and Objective of the Study.

In order to develop a measure of moral reasoning orientation (MRO) for the leadership context, this study will use the normative model of servant leadership. Greenleaf (1977) advanced the theory of servant leadership as grounded in the moral principles of empowering followers, supporting their growth as leaders, and prioritizing the moral act of serving others’ needs before leading as positional power. Sendjaya, et al. (2008) recognised the challenges of handling ethical dilemmas in their conceptualization of responsible-morality and the expression of authority within leader-follower relationships. They contended that responsible morality ensures that servant leaders continually employ legitimate and ethically justified means as well as seek moral and well-reasoned ends when achieving goals. Nevertheless, there is no empirical clarification on the ethical approaches that leaders employ when making moral decisions or the manner in which they perceive and handle dilemmas (Levitt and Aligo, 2012). An example of such dilemmas is reconciling the interest of shareholders when they are distinct from employees’ values.

Furthermore, the followers’ perspective on wanting to be servant leaders is yet to be empirically proven and only one author has laid emphasis on the moral dimension which differentiates servant leadership (SL) from other forms of leadership. Therefore, a clearer understanding of leaders’ MRO is needed, particularly because their reasoning does not only affect their style of leadership but also may have an impact on the followers’ moral development (Ho and Lin, 2016). Moreover, leaders’ moral development affects their organisational ethical climate (Schminke, et al., 2005). An evaluation of the moral perspective of servant leadership as a unique model of normative leadership (Simola, et al., 2010) will address a gap in knowledge regarding SL antecedents (Lanctot and Irving, 2007).
Currently, existing measures of SL have focused on features which overlap with other styles of leadership. Although Sendjaya et al. (2008) focused on differentiating SL on the basis of its moral dimension, their scale only measures one moral aspect of the six SL dimensions. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten’s (2011) servant leadership survey (SLS) is a theoretically sound, statistically robust and multidimensional scale, but it lacks a measure of moral dimensions. For this reason, the authors seek to extend the theoretical conceptualisation of SL based on Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) with a dimension of moral reasoning orientation.

Nonetheless, a suitable instrument to measure leaders’ MRO does not exist. This could be as a result of the lack of emphasis on morality in decision making, the complexity of the construct of moral reasoning, inconsistencies in existing scales to measure moral reasoning, and lack of scales suited to the context. Prominently recognised instruments in the field of moral psychology have focused on two moral reasoning orientations, predominantly on justice ethics with some additional tools looking at ethics of care. For instance, the Defining Issues Test which examines the levels of moral development is often used to study Kohlberg’s model, whilst Bampton and Maclagan’s (2009) tool measures the care orientation in a business context.

However, few studies and instruments bring the two together, including Yacker and Weinberg’s (1990) Moral Orientation scale (MOS) and Liddell, et al.’s (1992) Measure of Moral Orientation (MMO). Nonetheless, these tools use items designed for measuring MRO in children and students respectively. Although these are equally good measures having construct validity, they are not suitable for the study of leadership. Designing a suitable instrument requires the development of items that are representative of situations leaders handle in the workplace. Therefore, the development of an instrument to measure MRO in organisational contexts will make an original contribution to the field.

3.0 Moral Reasoning Orientation (MRO)

MRO is the individual’s ability to identify and resolve morally inclined issues in their social environment (Naber and Moffett, 2017). It has been discussed in relation to ethnic groups, age, gender and social economic status and empirically studied in diverse countries using different developed measurement tools (Dakin, 2014). The two theories germane to this study are grounded in the work of two psychologists, Kohlberg and Gilligan, whose works originated from the studies of Piaget (Lan et al., 2010).

*Ethics of Justice (EOJ)*

Kohlberg (2008) developed the cognitive moral development theory popularly referred to as the ethics of justice (EOJ). This theory generally focuses on independence, autonomy and fairness. The justifications for moral reasoning were categorised into three
levels: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Kohlberg’s model has been used to suggest that leaders would use post-conventional reasoning as this is the highest level of moral development, and items for measurement have generally been framed to reflect this stage. However, the EOJ model was critiqued by Kohlberg’s student, Gilligan (1992), as being androcentric and limiting due to the fact that the sample was gender biased and the dilemmas employed in his studies were hypothetical (Simola, et al., 2010). Despite these valid arguments, Gilligan has been criticized for oversimplifying Kohlberg’s conclusions based on the contention that society, in reality, needs guidelines and principles in order to promote social harmony (Jaffe and Hyde, 2000).

**Ethics of Care (EOC)**

In response to Kohlberg’s model, Gilligan (1982) developed a theory of an ethic of care. Gilligan proposed that people solve moral issues using different approaches to reasoning that can be distinct from the rigid and sequential structure which Kohlberg articulated. Gilligan’s (1982) research focused to some extent on distinctions between males and females but emphasized that a care orientation toward ethical reasoning did not represent an inferior mode of morality but represents a more holistic approach. The ethic of care (EOC) reflects a concern for others and supports benevolence, acceptance of others, prioritisation of relationships and empathy (Glover, 2001). Individuals with a care orientation also portray an attitude of fairness and the promotion of societal ideals which are also present in EOJ. This suggests that care and justice orientations have some overlap.

**4.0 Servant Leadership (SL)**

According to Greenleaf, ‘*A servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first*’ (1977, p. 27). This passage is the most frequently cited definition of SL (Parris and Peachey, 2013). Although the terms ‘servant’ and ‘leadership’ are often contradictory in their everyday usage, Greenleaf’s idea is hinged on the idea that serving is a mode of leading; a notion inspired by Hesse’s story, *Journey to the East*, in which portrays a character in a dual role of serving others whilst leading them. As such, SL is a model of leadership that is applicable at all levels of the organisation and promotes organisational productivity through serving others (Sendjaya, et al., 2008).

This concept of servant-hood, though paradoxical does not in itself portray a low-self image of a leader, but a voluntary subordination for common good (Sendjaya et al., 2008). In fact, Greenleaf acknowledged that power cannot be eliminated from the equation as he noted “servant-leaders are functionally superior because they are closer to the ground — they hear things, see things, know things, and their intuitive insight is exceptional. Because of this, they are dependable and trusted” (1977, p. 56). This suggests that a servant leader’s power is maximised in rendering service, and in that they use persuasion rather than coercive power to influence their followers.
Anderson (2009), however, argued that the concept is less suitable in for-profit organisations as it is unclear whether SL is merely an underdeveloped theory of leadership or a model that suggests the degree to which persons can serve others. SL has also been criticized as being more prevalent in some cultures than in others (Robbins and Judge, 2013), gender biased and androcentric (Eicher-Catt, 2005). There are also concerns that the inclusion of spirituality in SL theory may conflict with the spiritual orientation of some persons (Lee and Zemke, 1993). Whilst the concept of servitude also has been known to stem from different worldviews, both religious and non-religious (Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora, 2008), consideration of moral reasoning in relation to servant leadership could provide further clarification as to the paradoxical conflict of serving and leading.

Nonetheless, the field of SL is evolving and empirical evidence has shown it has relevance in today’s organisations. For instance, a number of organisations claim to practice SL such as TDIndustries, AFLAC, Southwest Airlines (Lanctot and Irving, 2010) with some studies showing enhanced follower effectiveness (Black, 2010).

**SL and Morality.**

Reynolds (2011) noted that numerous aspects of servant leadership are grounded in the moral attitude of the leader. For example, moral components of SL emphasise equality and the response to the needs of followers (Dierendonck and Nuitjen, 2011) which Reynolds (2011) associated with care ethics. The relationality of SL characteristics, such as healing, empathizing, listening, and fostering others’ individual growth (Spears, 2005), also supports Reynolds’ (2011) proposition that servant leaders tend more towards an ethics of care than a justice orientation and Anderson’s (2009) assertion that the feature of ‘other-focus’ in servanted organisations is aligned with EOC. Furthermore, Dakin (2014) also noted that specific dimensions of SL such as personal responsibility and honesty relate to EOJ. Noddings’ (2003) contribution to the concept of care includes obligation and commitment which are key features of justice as elements of care.

In Noddings’ articulation of caring, however, one has a natural ‘I must’ drive or one is committed to a course because of the desire to care for another. These conceptual parallels observed in SL with theories of ethics, however, do not satisfactorily explain a clear alignment of SL to either EOC or EOJ. Indeed, since SL is applicable in a justice-oriented system by a caring leader, there is no clear distinction as to which orientation a servant leader would prefer. Moreover, there are to date no empirical studies that explore moral orientation in servant leadership. This study will contribute not only a new instrument to measure MRO in organizational and leadership contexts but will also expand the discourse on moral components of servant leadership theory.
5.0 Methodology

This study proposes the design and validation of a new MRO survey for leadership based on the procedure of instrumentation from the pilot study to the validation stage (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). The instrument will comprise structured questions with items exemplifying behaviours of justice and care orientation in a business context and employ a Likert scale rating for respondents to assess their leaders. Development of items will be based on Nodding’s (2003) and Gilligan’s (1992) classifications for EOC and Kohlberg’s (2008) for EOJ, with both orientations informed by Lyons’ (1998) and Agerstrom et al.’s (2011) categorizations. The data analysis will employ exploratory factor analysis for scale development and correlation for validation. Statistical analysis will be based on data collected from a sample of 500 followers who will rate their leaders’ moral orientation using the new MRO scale and the degree of servant leadership using van Dierendonck and Nuijten’s (2011) SLS, while the motivation to serve (MTS) would be measured using Ng, Koh and Goh’s (2008) scale.

6.0 References


