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Do Women Stand Back to Move Forward? Gender Differences in Top US Business Leaders' Messages of Servant-Leadership

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Abstract

This study aimed to address gendered aspects of servant-leadership and its viability for high performing businesses. Because the distinguishing aspects of servant-leadership tend to be attributed with traditionally feminine behaviors and traits, servant-leadership is often considered too soft for business. Furthermore, this feminization of servant-leadership may perpetuate the disadvantaging of women in achieving leadership status. To determine servant-leadership attitudes, rhetorical constructions of leadership within the commencement speeches of 50 Fortune1000 and Power50 executives are analyzed and gender differences explored. Results showed that gender differences in the framing of servant-leadership approaches can be observed, with Standing-Back being the most salient difference across three stages of analysis. Nevertheless, differences are subtle and in the larger picture servant-leadership attitudes are present in both women and men in the upper echelons of US business executives.

Keywords: servant-leadership, women's leadership, gender, executive leadership

The persistent absence of women in the upper echelons of management is an issue that continues to occupy the concern of governments, businesses, and leadership researchers. Despite a plethora of research to understand the reasons behind the persistent gender leadership gap, actual progress in practice remains minimal, with only 5.1% of Fortune1000 executives being women (Catalyst, 2016). One potential reason behind the perpetual systemic bias against women may be the rigid underlying androcentric philosophies of leading (Eicher-Catt, 2005; Morales, 2019). Servant-leadership presents an alternative approach to concept of leading that is gender-integrative (Lehrke & Sowden, 2017; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds, 2016). Yet this contemporary leadership model has been criticized for being too soft and inadequate in a fast-paced, profit- and performance driven neoliberal society (Laub, 2018; Smith et al., 2004). Moreover, the presumably "feminine" aspects of servant-leadership are another reason for hard business to reject servant-leadership (Lehrke & Sowden, 2017; Reynolds, 2016). Despite a growing body of literature on the effectiveness of executive female leaders (Adams, 2016; Conyon & He, 2017; Dezső & Ross, 2012; Eagly, 2007; Moreno-Gomez et al., 2018) and of servant-leadership (Choudhary et al., 2013; de Waal & Sivro, 2012; Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017) there still remains a need to clarify the impact of gender on servant-leadership practice in a business context (Lehrke & Sowden, 2017; Sims & Morris, 2018; Washington et al., 2006). This study aimed to explore the viability of servant-leadership for top business executives and for women seeking to break through the glass ceiling.

Business leaders in the United States generally enjoy exceptional status and power (Seider, 1974). With the ascent of a successful businessperson to the office of the president the public has recently become acutely aware of how communication reveals leader attitudes. Public gatherings such as university graduation ceremonies represent one way in which society celebrates leaders and develops concepts of leadership (Condit, 1985). Commencement speeches are often delivered by recognized leaders and are cultural artefacts that can reveal a great deal about the priorities of speakers (Hargrove et al., 2011; LaWare, 2009). As a performance of leadership (Condit, 1985), ceremonial speaking has the purpose of clarifying, negotiating, and reifying shared values (Agnew, 2008). Traditionally, commencement speeches offer graduates wisdom about the state of the world and advice for the future through the experiences of the speakers (Agnew, 2008; Bordelon, 2010; LaWare, 2009). As such, the commencement addresses of prominent business leaders can illuminate their espoused leadership theories and practices.

This study takes an exploratory approach to analyzing gender differences in servant-leadership by analyzing the rhetorical constructions of leadership of top US business executives in ceremonial speech. Employing a mixed method of content analysis, the paper explores whether and how top business leaders convey messages of leadership in their rhetoric. The espoused leadership attitudes of Fortune1000 leaders (women and men) and Power50 women are examined to provide further insight into gendered aspects of servant-leadership, as well as the potential of servant-leadership as a viable gender-integrative option for high performing organizations and as a gender-equalizer for women business leaders.

Servant-Leadership and Gender

Gendered Conceptualization of Servant-Leadership

Most servant-leadership literature does not adequately address the roles of women in leadership or issues of gender. A surge in empirical research on servant-leadership over the past 20 years (Eva et al., 2019) has contributed deeper understanding of Greenleaf's (2003) philosophy of leadership, yet attention to gender is still limited to a small body of studies and theoretical commentaries. Numerous conceptual models and survey instruments have been

developed in an effort to both operationalize servant-leadership, advance theory in the academic circuit, and enhance understanding (Eva et al., 2019; Parris & Peachey, 2013; van Dierendonck 2011; VanMeter et al., 2016), Many of the conceptual models differentiate servant-leadership from other leadership perspectives through constructs such as communal behaviors (Hogue, 2016), compassionate love (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015), agapáo (Ayers, 2008; Patterson, 2004), altruistic motive (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), or self-sacrifice (Matteson & Irving, 2006). Within the patriarchal understanding of leadership, these distinguishing aspects of servant-leadership are characterized by their association with traditional feminine behaviors or traits (Eicher-Catt, 2005; Lehrke & Sowden, 2017; Reynolds, 2011). Yet many other authors studying servant-leadership fail to acknowledge the gendered assumptions underpinning these constructs. Although interpretations diverge and converge as to which leadership aspects constitute servant-leadership definitively, the existing gendered interpretations within the field tend to agree that its differentiating factors of servant-leadership are associated with feminine gendered notions of communion as opposed to masculine gendered notions of agency.

Leadership in general, and particularly in business contexts, continues to be predominantly masculinized (Bierema, 2016; Lehrke & Sowden, 2017), and masculine ways of leading are still consciously and subconsciously regarded as superior (Madsen & Adrade, 2018). Gender socialization perpetuates the notion that leadership is a masculine role and culturally incongruent with communal and nurturing behaviors expected and perceived of women. Such deeply rooted gender expectations continue to hinder women's ability to successfully navigate the labyrinth to the C-suite proportional to women's representation in the workforce and society (Adams, 2016). Due to the systematic nature of gender bias in leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Madsen & Andrade, 2018) operating within a patriarchal matrix, the feminization of servant-leadership might be expected to perpetuate the disadvantaging of women in achieving leadership status (Brescoll, 2016; Lammers & Gast, 2017). Therefore, understanding gender differences in leaders who espouse servant-leadership attitudes can contribute to better understanding servant-leadership and its impact on women's leadership role attainment.

Gender Differences in Servant-Leadership

Despite the growing theoretical and empirical research base on servant-leadership, there is still little understanding of the role gender differences (or the lack thereof) may play in servant-leadership and women's leadership attainment. Within the broader field of leadership, extensive research has been conducted on gender differences, however, findings remain inconclusive. Some evidence has shown that gender differences in leadership style and effectiveness are not significant (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly et al., 1995), yet further research continues to provide evidence that gender bias is the main contributor to the glass ceiling (Brescoll, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Dominant themes in the field underscore the belief that women's leadership is characterized by aspects of communion and relationality, e.g. emotionality, collaborative approaches, inclusive communication, and participative decision making (Brescoll, 2016; Fine, 2007; Madden, 2007; Parker, 2005). Social role and gender congruency theories suggest that the gendered expectations and perceptions of women's leadership perpetuate the double bind that prevents women rising to executive ranks. The assumption here is that relational, collaborative, supportive and inclusive approaches to leadership are perceived as ineffective for business leadership.

As such, it is not surprising that skepticism prevails about employing a servant-leadership approach in masculinized business contexts when considering gender. Women may be more likely than men to adopt attitudes of servant-leadership (de Rubio & Kiser, 2015; Duff,

2013; Hogue, 2016; Washington et al. 2006) and as servant-leaders may be better suited to leadership roles in specific contexts (Duff, 2013; Politis, & Politis, 2018; Sims & Morris, 2018). Previous studies suggest that servant-leadership is a viable option for women to be successful as leaders (Ngunjiri, 2010; Politis & Politis, 2018). Female leaders may demonstrate the communal servant-leader behaviors like altruistic calling, emotional healing, and organizational stewardship more than men (Beck, 2014). Some female business owners felt their leadership was more authentic when adopting communal servant-leadership attitudes (Sims & Morris, 2018). However, lack of gender differences in agentic and communal servant-leader behaviors would suggest that servant-leadership creates a possibility for leaders to "step out of gender roles" (Barbuto & Gifford, 2010, p. 10) allowing women to integrate gender-congruent communal and gender-incongruent agentic behavior in their leadership. In patriarchal systems, however, traits and behaviors associated with femininity are valued less. Trends in servant-leadership theorizing on gendering and gender differences support the notion that servant-leadership successfully combines feminine (communal) and masculine (agentic) attributes and behaviors and assert that this integration of gendered attribution may be beneficial for women leaders. Nevertheless, there is still the issue that servant-leadership in and of itself is perceived as predominantly feminine and in the larger context of gender bias would still be disadvantaged.

The Present Study

To determine servant-leadership attitudes of top US business executives' and explore gender differences therein, this study analyzes messages of servant-leadership in the rhetoric of their commencement addresses. The study follows a mixed methods content analysis design conducted in three stages. Although gaining in popularity in the field of leadership, content analysis is not yet widely applied in servant-leadership research. Because communication is one of the most important aspects of leadership behavior, content analysis has potential to extend empirical research in leadership meaningfully and enrich leadership studies through contextually rich data (Insch et al., 1997). Mixed methods designs are also not very common in dominant leadership publications (Stentz et al., 2012). Although qualitative and mixed methods studies are also becoming more common, they are still largely marginalized in terms of publication in high ranking journals (Gardner et al., 2020).

Method

The first stage consisted of a quantitative content analysis procedure modelled after Hargrove (2009), and applying analytical constructs at word level using content matrices of pre-defined terms associated with the main constructs servant-leadership (SL) and non-servant-leadership (NSL), and their subconstructs. The second stage comprised a structured qualitative content analysis applying pre-defined coding schemes modelled after the format used by Oliver (2004). The third stage was a semi-structured thematic analysis also guided by the predefined analytical constructs.

The content matrices and coding schemes for SL and NSL developed by Reynolds (2013) were used. The schemes adapted subconstructs of the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) for SL: accountability, authenticity, courage, forgiveness, empowerment, humility, standing-back, and stewardship, and modified subconstructs from Hargrove's (2009) content matrix with dimensions from Bass' (1999) and Kouzes and Posner's (2010) leadership models for NSL: forward-looking, motivation, credibility, inspiration, influence, and idealization. These subconstructs also formed the basis for thematic analysis. Coding schemes guided coders in rating the speeches as individual units and in tagging phrases and sentences within the text. Content validation ensured that the words assigned to each construct/subconstruct in the content matrices were distinct and the definitions provided in the

coding schemes discrete. In Stage 3 rhetorical devices (sentence strings stories, appeals, arguments) in constructing messages were coded using the predefined analytical (sub)constructs.

The traditional gender binary is applied within the gender-integrative perspective. A comprehensive and inclusive gender spectrum analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. The contributions of more expansive critical theory perspectives that problematize social inequalities of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other categories are highly valuable and pertinent; nevertheless, this paper is limited in its approach by binary gender differences in servant-leadership.

Commencement addresses delivered by prominent US business executives between 2005 and 2012 provided the data. The sample was drawn from the Fortune 1000 (F1000) and Top 50 Women in Business lists—also known as the Power 50 (P50) with 25 different female and 25 different male leaders. Transcripts, manuscripts, and video recordings of speeches were matched to the speakers and collected from the Internet. If more than one speech per speaker occurred within the study's time span, the speech with the highest word count was included. Only addresses held at commencement ceremonies of four-year institutions of higher education in the United States were included.

Stage 1

To begin, word counts were noted, and tallies compared by the main constructs, subconstructs, and by gender. Correlation of word frequencies at the main construct level was carried out, then means and standard deviations were calculated and compared. The average word count was between 2194-2278 words and the highest and lowest range of words between 944-4334; men tended to have average higher word counts. Female leaders used words related to both SL and NSL more frequently than males at both main and subconstruct levels, with the exception that male speakers had higher word frequencies for the SL subconstructs accountability and forgiveness. Results of Pearson's correlation (Table 1) showed that SL language usage was significantly and positively correlated with NSL language usage ($p = 0.00$, $r = 0.53$).

Means comparisons showed, the frequency of words associated with NSL ($M = 93.52$) had a higher mean total than SL ($M = 34.22$) and that female speakers displayed a higher total frequency of both main constructs SL ($M = 37.36$) and NSL ($M = 100.32$) (Table 2). At the subconstruct level females means comparisons also showed a higher frequency of words associated with six of the eight SL subconstructs (Table 3). The male speakers had a slightly higher mean total frequency of SL subconstructs accountability ($M = 4.44$) and forgiveness ($M = 0.28$) as compared to the female speakers, thus reinforcing the results of the tallies.

A multivariate analysis using MANOVA (Table 4) showed that gender did not have a significant effect on the use of the words associated with SL ($F (1, 48) = 1.67$; $p = 0.20$) or NSL($F (1, 48) = 1.93$; $p = 0.17$). However, at the subconstruct level (Table 5) the results showed that gender had a significant effect on only one SL subconstruct, standing-back ($F (1, 48) = 4.00$; $p = 0.05$).

Table 1

Pearson's Correlation of Word Frequencies: Servant-Leadership and Non-Servant-

Leadership

		SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP
SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	Pearson Correlation	1	0.53*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	N	50	50
NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N		50

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation of Frequencies: Servant-Leadership and Non-Servant-

Leadership

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	Female	100.32	35.39	25
	Male	86.72	33.73	25
	Total	93.57	34.82	50
SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	Female	37.36	14.26	25
	Male	31.08	19.64	25
	Total	34.22	17.28	50

Table 3

Mean and Standard Deviation Frequencies: Servant-Leadership Subconstructs

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
ACCOUNTABILITY	Female	2.80	1.98	25
	Male	4.44	5.98	25
	Total	3.62	4.49	50
AUTHENTICITY	Female	4.84	5.22	25
	Male	3.88	3.15	25
	Total	4.36	4.29	50
COURAGE	Female	4.40	3.82	25
	Male	3.92	5.45	25
	Total	4.16	4.66	50
FORGIVENESS	Female	0.16	0.37	25
	Male	0.28	0.54	25
	Total	0.22	0.47	50
EMPOWERMENT	Female	5.40	3.03	25
	Male	5.00	4.59	25
	Total	5.20	3.85	50
HUMILITY	Female	7.40	6.80	25
	Male	5.40	4.68	25
	Total	6.40	5.87	50
STANDING-BACK	Female	5.84	3.73	25
	Male	3.96	2.86	25
	Total	4.90	3.42	50
STEWARDSHIP	Female	6.52	6.56	25
	Male	4.20	4.65	25
	Total	5.36	5.75	50

Table 4

MANOVA Gender Effects: Servant-Leadership and Non-Servant-Leadership

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	492.980a	1	492.98	1.67	0.20
	NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	2312.00b	1	2312.00	1.93	0.17
Intercept	SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	58550.42	1	58550.42	198.82	0.00
	NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	437299.52	1	437299.52	365.89	0.00
Gender	SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	492.98	1	492.98	1.67	0.20
	NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	2312.00	1	2312.00	1.93	0.17
Error	SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	14135.60	48	294.49		
	NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	57368.48	48	1195.18		
Total	SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	73179.00	50			
	NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	496980.00	50			
Corrected Total	SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	14628.58	49			
	NON-SERVANT-LEADERSHIP	59680.48	49			

a. R Squared = 0.03 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.01)

Table 5

MANOVA Results for Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for SL Subconstructs

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	ACCOUNTABILITY	33.62a	1	33.62	1.70	0.20
	AUTHENTICITY	11.52b	1	11.52	0.62	0.44
	COURAGE	2.88c	1	2.88	0.13	0.72
	FORGIVENESS	0.18d	1	0.18	0.83	0.37
	EMPOWERMENT	2.00e	1	2.00	0.13	0.72
	HUMILITY	50.00f	1	50.00	1.47	0.23
	STANDING-BACK	44.18g	1	44.18	4.00	0.05
	STEWARDSHIP	67.28h	1	67.28	2.08	0.16
Intercept	ACCOUNTABILITY	655.22	1	655.22	33.03	0.00
	AUTHENTICITY	950.48	1	950.48	51.15	0.00
	COURAGE	865.28	1	865.28	39.12	0.00
	FORGIVENESS	2.42	1	2.42	11.17	0.00
	EMPOWERMENT	1352.00	1	1352.00	89.39	0.00
	HUMILITY	2048.00	1	2048.00	60.09	0.00
	STANDING-BACK	1200.50	1	1200.50	108.66	0.00
	STEWARDSHIP	1436.48	1	1436.48	44.48	0.00
Gender	ACCOUNTABILITY	33.62	1	33.62	1.70	0.20
	AUTHENTICITY	11.52	1	11.52	0.62	0.44
	COURAGE	2.88	1	2.88	0.13	0.72
	FORGIVENESS	0.18	1	0.18	0.83	0.37
	EMPOWERMENT	2.00	1	2.00	0.13	0.72
	HUMILITY	50.00	1	50.00	1.47	0.23
	STANDING-BACK	44.18	1	44.18	4.00	0.05*
	STEWARDSHIP	67.28	1	67.28	2.08	0.16
Error	ACCOUNTABILITY	952.16	48	19.84		
	AUTHENTICITY	892.00	48	18.58		
	COURAGE	1061.84	48	22.12		
	FORGIVENESS	10.40	48	0.22		
	EMPOWERMENT	726.00	48	15.13		
	HUMILITY	1636.00	48	34.08		
	STANDING-BACK	530.32	48	11.05		
	STEWARDSHIP	1550.24	48	32.30		
Total	ACCOUNTABILITY	1641.00	50			
	AUTHENTICITY	1854.00	50			
	COURAGE	1930.00	50			
	FORGIVENESS	13.00	50			
	EMPOWERMENT	2080.00	50			
	HUMILITY	3734.00	50			
	STANDING-BACK	1775.00	50			
	STEWARDSHIP	3054.00	50			
Corrected Total	ACCOUNTABILITY	985.78	49			
	AUTHENTICITY	903.52	49			
	COURAGE	1064.72	49			
	FORGIVENESS	10.58	49			
	EMPOWERMENT	728.00	49			
	HUMILITY	1686.00	49			
	STANDING-BACK	574.50	49			
	STEWARDSHIP	1617.52	49			

a. R Squared = 0.02 (Adjusted R Squared = -0.01)
b. R Squared = 0.01 (Adjusted R Squared = -0.01)
c. R Squared = 0.05 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.03)
d. R Squared = 0.03 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.01)
e. R Squared = 0.03 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.01)
f. R Squared = 0.04 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.02)
g. R Squared = 0.09 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.07)
h. R Squared = 0.07 (Adjusted R Squared = 0.05)

* Significantly different at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Discussion of Stage 1

The findings of Stage 1 suggested that the business leaders in the Fortune1000 and Power50 would tend to espouse more generalized attitudes of leadership rather than attitudes of servant-leadership. Word frequency tallies showed that words associated with NSL as a main construct occurred more often than words assigned to the SL construct. The mean differences analysis supported the finding that NSL language had the strongest presence between the two main constructs in the speeches of both women and men. This is not surprising considering that the content matrix had a higher number of entries (NSL=144:SL=70) many of the words related to a generalized concept of leadership e.g. NSL are much more common in general language usage (e.g. world, making, great, change). The correlation between NSL and SL suggests that the more leaders constructed messages conveying leadership in general they also tended to integrate messages of servant-leadership attitudes. The correlation may also be an indication that distinguishing between the two main constructs is difficult at word level due to SL being inherently a leadership attitude and thus becomes confounded. The range of word count indicated that some speeches may have utilized much more space (e.g. words) to convey messages. Volumes of words and the minimal frequency required to indicate a theme (e.g. one mention of a word) could explain the high standard deviations observed. Despite lower average word counts, the more frequent use of words associated with leadership in the females speeches suggests that in general the women leaders in this sample tended to highlight messages related to leadership in their commencement addresses more than the men. Although no significant gender differences in the leadership messages at the main construct level were found, female speeches had a significantly higher use of words associated with the SL construct Standing-Back as compared to the males. Men's speeches showed higher use of words associated with accountability and forgiveness, but the difference was not significant. To explore these results further, Stages 2 and 3 of the study focused on qualitatively assessing the thematic occurrence of the main constructs and subconstructs and comparing thematic constructions.
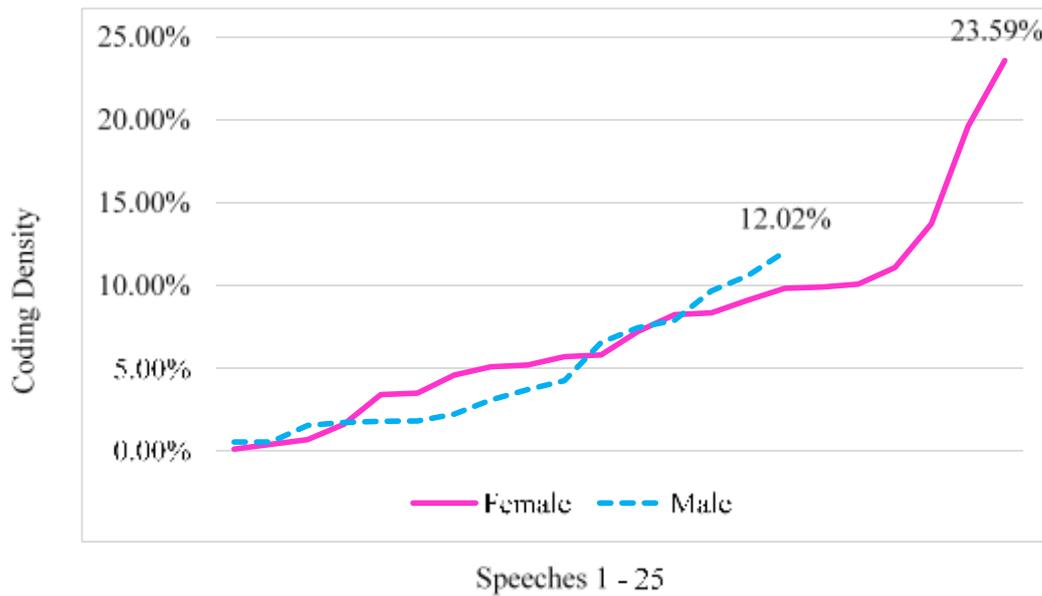
Stage 2

A structured qualitative analysis was carried out using coding schemes with specific focus on differentiating between expressions of leadership at the main construct level. The 50 speeches were analyzed at phrase and sentence levels to gain a general impression of messages conveying leadership. The construction of SL and NSL themes was analyzed and grouped according to occurrence (only SL, mostly SL, mostly NSL, only NSL, neither SL nor NSL) and then compared by gender. The two largest groupings were of speeches that contained messages expressing Mostly SL and only SL. Women's speeches were ranked more often as being coded with SL with 22 out of 25 speeches having at least one SL-coded unit, whereas then men's speeches were more balanced with 16 out of 25 obtaining an SL-coded unit. SL was coded much more frequently in female speakers' passages (149 passages compared to 83) by a few more speakers (38 compared to 35 male speakers).

The speeches were then analyzed for coding density. For this analysis, the coding coverage for each speech was calculated on the two main constructs, plotted within each speech then compared by gender (Figures 1 and 2). The SL-coded passages reached an overall higher density among the female speakers' and a wider range than among the male speakers (Figure 1). The range for NSL was narrower for both female and male speakers and the density for NSL messages in the women's speeches was lower (Figure 2).
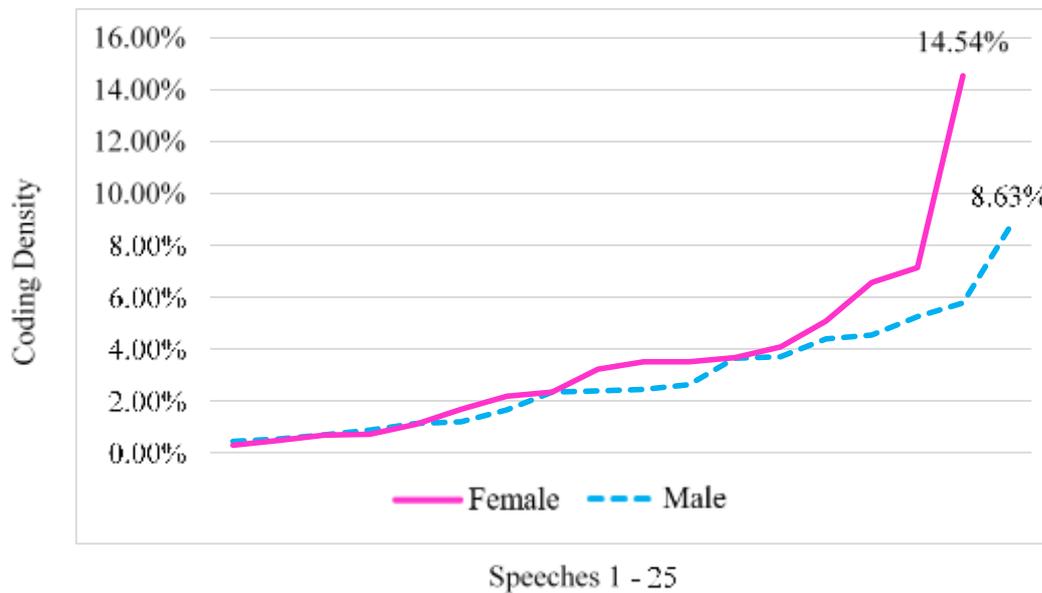
Figure 1

Servant-Leadership Coding Density by Gender

Figure 2

Non-Servant-Leadership Coding Density by Gender

Discussion of Stage 2

Results of Stage 2 contradict and supplement Stage 1 findings. Coding analysis reveals that SL messages were much more prevalent in the leaders' rhetoric than Stage 1 statistical analysis suggested. When taken in context, SL and combinations of SL and NSL were observed more often than NSL alone. Stage 2 reveals further that when leadership became a theme, deeper interpretation showed speakers leaned more toward expressions of servant-leadership. This finding supports the correlation between SL and NSL messages in Stage 1 due the result that a higher density of coded NSL messages was accompanied by a higher density of coded

SL messages. As such, Stage 2 analysis, which accounted for richer interpretation of contextualized messages as opposed to constrained word level analysis, demonstrates how messages of SL became more salient in context. These findings suggest that the stronger the theme of leadership in a given speech, the more likely a speaker is to convey messages of SL rather than NSL attitudes. Further contradictions to Stage 1 findings are also observed for gender differences. Stage 2 findings support the comparison of the means as coding resulted in a higher frequency and density of SL messages in female speakers' texts than in the males' texts. Stage 3 analysis takes the qualitative interpretation of the speeches a step further to explore constructions and messages in more depth.

Stage 3

In Stage 3 thematic analysis considered the broader use of rhetorical devices in conveying messages of SL and NSL through coding of their subconstructs. As a comprehensive discussion of the Stage 3 results is beyond the scope of this paper, those findings that best inform Stages 1 and 2 are reported in brief. Using the coded passages, the speeches were analyzed according to subconstructs at the phrase, sentence, and strings of sentences level with attention to rhetorical devices (stories, appeals, statements) and how these devices create meaning in the construction of leadership. Overall thematic strength of individual subconstructs was noted and then illustrated and interpreted through exemplary extracts. The first part of the thematic analysis focused on messages to illustrate SL and NSL both as individual constructs and as combined constructs. In the second part, a more in-depth interpretation of subconstructs of SL is provided to understand the different ways in which women and men construct messages conveying servant-leadership.

In the speeches that were coded in as communicating NSL exclusively, the most salient ideas communicated by the speakers included the need for initiating transformation to affect positive changes and the importance of achieving excellence. Speeches coded exclusively with SL messages focused strongly on stewardship through serving the community and giving back to society. Most of the speeches communicated some combination of expressions of NSL and SL. When NSL remained the predominant message present in the speech, the focus of the speech was congruent with themes of NSL but contained a few statements expressing SL-related concepts. Examples below demonstrate how these themes can be interpreted separately or become intertwined.

- Indira K. Nooyi highlighted on the importance of always striving for excellence and setting the high standards necessary to be successful and noted further that people who achieve the greatest success are those who recognize the value of others.
- George S. Barret commented on the importance of empowerment and being humble but emphasized the significance of innovation and progress.
- Janet L. Robinson discussed the importance of leaders being role models and taking risks, but also stressed the importance of empowering others and giving back to community.
- Kenneth I. Chennault expressed his belief in the crucial roles of initiating change and taking action but emphasized this should be done to solidify diversity and stewardship as moral values.

Themes Within the Analytical Subconstructs

The structured thematic analysis showed that SL had stronger coding density for women than for men in their speeches. In this section, differences in the ways that women and men constructed SL messages are presented. Overall, four of the eight SL constructs were the most prevalent for women in the coded passages. These constructs were stewardship, courage, humility, and standing-back. Two themes, humility and standing-back showed the strongest differences in coding density for the female speakers as compared to the males. These themes

associated with the women's speeches are discussed in brief to illustrate differences in how the female and male speakers constructed their messages.

Stewardship and courage were the most salient themes in all the speeches, and the female speakers showing a stronger tendency to highlight stewardship. Among the women, the Stewardship was characterized by messages around social responsibility and giving back to society. For example, Patricia Woertz, encouraged graduates to make their choices such that they can best contribute to society. Sabrina Simmons, called for graduates to look beyond the limits of their work context and seek to contribute to their families and communities. Barbara Desoer emphasized bringing one's full value to every task to bring value to society. Some thematic construction by male speakers included stewardship as having a social conscience and a deeper purpose, addressing wider global needs, and viewing the responsibility of an organization to serve the community, protect and enhance the world.

Courage was also a strong theme throughout the speeches. The female speakers conveyed messages related to courage more than men. A common theme between the genders was courage as a form of questioning the status quo. Women's constructions of courage included messages highlighting aspects such as challenging authority both as a leader and as a follower. Sheryl Sandberg emphasized that leaders have the responsibility to encourage questioning authority. Other women, such as Amy Woods Brinkley and Barbara Desoer discussed the need to seek unconventional solutions and be critical in one's thinking. In contrast, the male speakers constructed courage more in terms of risk taking, being a catalyst for change, and shaping the future.

Humility is one of two themes, humility and standing-back, that showed the strongest tendencies in coding density for the female speakers. The women executives' messages tended to highlight self-knowledge and interdependence as core aspects of humility in their practice. Carly Fiorina commented on how achievement and success cannot be achieved by heroics or without the support of others. Sabrina Simmons commented about the way humility allows people to see beyond their own ambitions and view the bigger picture. Sheryl Sandberg also noted the facilitating capacity of humility toward achieving broader societal goals. Within this theme, the men tended to highlight the need to acknowledge others and translate recognition of others into organizational practice.

Finally, the SL construct standing-back emerged as one of the themes with the strongest coding density among the women business leaders compared to the men in this study. The female executives constructed messages of standing-back with themes related to the development of self and others. Lifelong learning and mentorship were strong themes within this subconstruct. Kay Krill emphasized how facilitating others' growth can strengthen the community. She described her passion for mentoring and empowering women which she has channeled into a girls' leadership-mentoring program. Patricia Woertz made a compelling case for how a drive for self-development and unquenchable curiosity can be a differentiating factor for success.

Discussion of Stage 3

Stage 3 results further confirm the correlation between NSL messages and SL with themes of general leadership underpinning attitudes of servant-leadership. The thematic analysis indicated that most speakers, female and male, tended to communicate a combination of SL and NSL principles. Overarching SL messages that were articulated in the speeches included an emphasis on serving the community and giving back to the community, and overarching messages of NSL highlighted initiating transformational change and setting high standards for achieving ambitious goals and excellence. Although both women and men constructed messages conveying servant-leadership attitudes of stewardship, courage, humility, and standing-back, the ways in which they made meaning out of these subconstructs

differed slightly. The subtlety of word usage to highlight different aspects of SL could explain how the quantitative analysis yielded some contradictory results to the thematic analysis, as the thematic interpretation in context revealed the intertwined meanings of non-servant and servant-leadership. The richer interpretation revealing the subtle differences in language usage can explain how their meaning could not be fully captured by the statistical analysis and why they did not reach statistical significance. Stage 3 did, however, confirm the statistically significant gender difference observed in Stage 1 showing that the females speakers conveyed messages aligned with the subconstruct standing-back more frequently than males.

General Discussion

This study sought to address the leadership gender gap by exploring the viability of servant-leadership as a gender-integrative model of leadership for top business executives. Because the feminization of servant-leadership might be expected to perpetuate gender bias and negatively impact on women's leadership role attainment, the design attempted to clarify the presence of servant-leadership practice in a high performing business context and provide insight into gender differences. Findings showed that most of the US business executives of Fortune1000 companies and Power50 women conveyed messages of leadership that espoused attitudes of servant-leadership in their commencement speeches. Women business executives made leadership a theme more frequently and with greater density than men. At least some of the results in all three stages suggest that women in this sample tended to espouse servant-leadership more than the men. The female and male business leaders constructed messages conveying servant-leadership attitudes aligned with and integrating both communal and agentic aspects with women displaying a higher density of messages with gender congruency. Furthermore, findings showed that gender differences in the constructions of messages through which servant-leadership attitudes were conveyed were minimal and subtle. In all three stages, standing-back showed the greatest salience as an aspect of servant-leadership that differentiated the leadership messages among the female and male speakers.

As the first study to explore servant-leadership and gender differences in the rhetoric of Fortune1000 and Power50 executives, this study contributes to understanding servant-leadership in a high performing business context. Although some skepticism exists about servant-leadership's effectiveness in highly competitive business contexts, many of the Fortune1000 and Power50 leaders in this study displayed attitudes that included characteristics of servant-leadership. Hence the findings contribute to the literature suggesting servant-leadership is viable for high performing business contexts (de Waal & Sivro, 2012; Laub, 2018; Sims & Morris, 2018). This contribution may have implications for strategic leadership, that have not been previously considered. Upper echelons theory asserts that executive leaders' characteristics and attitudes are reflected in organizational outcomes (Hambrick, 2018). The gender of CEOs and the gender composition of executive teams may influence the impact of executive behaviors on firm outcomes (Adams, 2016; Neely et al., 2020). The experiences, values, and personalities of executive leaders have a strong influence on the way they perceive and interpret their circumstances and act on their decisions (Hambrick, 2007). If the Fortune1000 and Power50 leaders practice the leadership attitudes conveyed through their speeches, then the results of this study could provide some evidence of the business success of servant-leadership in upper echelons.

A further contribution of this study is new evidence that top US female and male business leaders espouse gender-integrative approaches to leadership. Most of the speakers, both women and men, tended to display at least some attitudes that aligned with both communal and agentic subconstructs of servant-leadership. It has been asserted in the literature that the integration of feminine and masculine qualities of servant-leadership may promote gender equity (Oner, 2009; Reynolds, 2011), and that women leaders by leveraging the communal

aspects of servant-leadership may be more able to access leadership roles (Hogue, 2016; Lehrke & Sowden, 2017). The gender-integrative nature of servant-leadership allows them to create an authentic leader identity that is congruent with gender expectations (Sims & Morris, 2018). Although results presented here suggest gender-integrative and servant-leadership attitudes do not hinder attainment of executive leadership roles, they do not provide a causal link between espousal of gender-integrative servant-leadership and increased entry for women into the C-suite.

This was the first study to employ mixed methods content analysis to explore leadership communication of top US business leaders in terms of gendered aspects of servant-leadership. Although the findings in this study indicated that traditional gender socialization continues to shape leadership and servant-leadership attitudes, it also supports evidence that gender differences are minimal (Gipson et al. 2017). The tendency for women in this sample to espouse servant-leadership more than the men aligns with literature suggesting that women in practice are expected to and perceived to display servant-leadership more than men (Duff, 2013). Social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2015) supports the claim that communal aspects of servant-leadership are more aligned with female gender socialization. However, considering that nearly all the differences observed in the interpretive analysis were not statistically significant, this study may provide new evidence that the double-bind effects of gender congruency in leadership practice may be diminishing. This result is supported in discourse around the gender-integrative impact of servant-leadership (Lehrke & Sowden, 2017; Reynolds, 2016). Insight into the subtlety of gender differences has not been addressed to a great extent in the literature, particularly those studies using statistical measures.

A final contribution of this study is the interpretive insight it provides into the gendered construction of servant-leadership dimensions. Although the Fortune1000 and Power50 leaders constructed messages conveying similar servant-leadership aspects, the subtle differences in how they made sense of their servant-leadership demonstrates the elusive nature of gendering in communication. Despite gender differences being subtle, a deeper understanding of one specific difference regarding which aspects of servant-leadership women highlighted in their speeches. In all three stages, the women conveyed messages aligned with attitudes and behaviors of standing-back as this subconstruct showed the greatest salience both interpretively and statistically. These results are partially in line with the assessment of Sousa and van Dierendonck (2017) in their clustering of humility with standing-back as other-oriented (communal) dimensions of servant-leadership, which would in turn align with gender congruous expectations.

Standing-back is understood as a moderated stance of self-awareness and awareness of others; leaders put the needs and interests of others above their own, support the personal growth of others whilst pursuing with care and intent their own self-improvement (Verdorfer, 2016). It includes an appropriate estimation of one's merits and achievements, and the ability to find the appropriate middle ground between self-promotion and self-protection (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017), self-absorption and self-sacrifice, self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation. Standing-back is also displayed through an ability to shift focus away from oneself, recognize and promote the contributions of others, and stay in the background when success is achieved (de Waal & Sivro, 2012). The emphasis among the women executives of fostering personal growth in others and pursuing their own lifelong learning is supported in the literature: Sims and Morris' (2018) account of women business owners showed a strong tendency for meeting the self-actualization needs of both their followers and themselves. It also reinforces the claim that the mutual fostering of personal growth is a key aspect not only of servant-leadership (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015) but also in business success (Sims & Morris, 2018). Nevertheless, the question remains whether women engaging in behaviors associated with standing-back fosters their attainment of executive roles or whether this

differentiating factor might indeed contribute to the persistent gender leadership gap in the upper echelons of business.

Implications

The insights that this study contributes—in particular regarding the subtle differences in constructions of servant-leadership experienced, perceived, and conveyed my women executives—have theoretical and practical implications. As the first mixed methods content analysis of executive leader communication in servant-leadership, it provides an example of means by which interpretive approaches can aid in distinguishing subtle differences in the construction of leadership meaning. However, further research is needed to clarify disagreement within the literature as to the gendered nature of servant-leadership constructs to better differentiate them. Theoretical implications concern primarily further expansion of research design to explore servant-leadership and gender and further development of existing research models. The exploration of gender provides insights for re-evaluating existing instruments and models and refining these through more rigorous gender analysis of constructs with heightened awareness of gender bias. Further development of research to clarify gendered and gender-integrative aspects of measurement could prove useful in better understanding gender differences (or lack thereof). For example, there is still some disagreement around as to the clustering of the subconstructs according to gendered aspects of communion and agency. Sousa and van Dierendonck (2017) described stewardship as an action-oriented (agentic) dimension related to "giving direction", whereas Reynolds (2011) Barbuto et al. (2014) and Sims and Morris (2018) described stewardship more as a communal concept in terms of altruism, trust, and "giving back" to the community.

This study also contributes to claims that attitudes and practice of servant-leadership may play a role in the leadership success and attainment of executive roles for women. Although several studies assert that promoting gender-congruent yet gender-integrative ways of leading would be beneficial to women business leaders (Lehrke & Sowden, 2017; Sims & Morris, 2018), a word of caution remains. Some evidence suggests that promoting supposedly more feminine behaviors can also prove detrimental to women's leadership attainment (Adams, 2016; Brescoll, 2016; Lammers & Gast, 2017). It is worth noting that then men in this sample were all ranked highly in the Fortune1000 (all in the top 400 firms), whereas only about half of the women ranked as highly, and that there were so few women represented in the F1000 that the study was extended to include the Power50 women in order to balance the sample. Do women stand back to move forward and upward in business leadership, or could standing-back be a factor that *holds them back*? The results of this study cannot conclusively offer a causal link. Therefore, further research in needed to ascertain whether gender congruency promotes or hinders women's attainment of leadership roles.

Awareness of the reduction of gender bias may increase opportunities for women to become leaders and the desirability of leadership roles for women (Hogue, 2016). Not only do leaders on executive boards need to become more aware of and accepting of a gender-integrative paradigm of leadership, but so do followers in order for servant-leadership practice to be more widely accepted and women to be provided more access to executive leadership roles (Brescoll, 2016: Lehrke & Sowden, 2017). Practical implications of this study address a need for human resource development (HRD) practitioners and business leaders to promote and reward servant-leadership and gender competency. Strategic HRD can work with executives and HR business partners to develop recruitment, selection, and promotion criteria, as well as for interventions aligned with and highlighting the communal and agentic aspects of servant-leadership while ensuring the equal development of these in both genders. As an example, specific development of the attitude of standing-back could be targeted. Women seeking to develop their leadership practice can leverage servant-leadership and be encouraged

to choose to lead and create further social change; men can be encouraged to lead in more gender-integrative ways through servant-leadership and pave a path to more gender-integration in the upper echelons of the business world.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample in this study represented a small elite population consisting of business leaders from predominantly non-marginalized groups of the largest, most financially successful companies in the United States. Although results have potential to be representative of this limited population, conclusions are not generalizable to wider contexts transnationally or transculturally. This study was also constrained by the scope of the data sampling, e.g. its focus on a specific form of rhetoric generated within a specific genre (as opposed to data generated by human subjects in response to surveys, experiments, or interviews). The structured, unobtrusive content analysis further limits the study. This method does not consider more contextualized versions of experience, does not give voice to the audience or the speakers' by unveiling their personal interpretations of their own messages that could be achieved through interviews or other forms of more interactive data collection. Finally, this research is limited by the constraining gender binary categories.

Future studies should attempt to include interviews with the leaders about their speeches and with audience members. Comments posted online that refer to commencement speeches could be included in future inquiry for an audience perspective. Accessing a wider range of genres for data sampling of leader communication such as autobiographies, speeches other contexts, communications with shareholders could enrich further research. Facebook broadcasts or tweets to assess gender differences in servant-leadership attitudes and practices. Case studies with explorations of communication and including financial information about the leaders' companies could also provide interesting insight into the viability of servant-leadership organizational effectiveness. Intersectional research could enhance concepts of servant-leadership through an exploration of the experiences of marginalized groups highlighting race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status and relevant effects. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies could also further examine the extent to which gender congruent behavior promotes or hinders women's leadership attainment.

Conclusion

The results of this study offer a glimpse into the shared attitudes and subtle differences in attitudes constructed by some of the most powerful business leaders in the United States. Gender integration requires a fundamental transformation of the way we experience humanity. The irony of conducting research on gendered aspects of servant-leadership lies in the need to invoke gender binaries for analysis to dismantle them. If organizations are to become more gender competent, a revaluation of our expectations of women and men must shift to that our concepts of leadership can shift from constraining binaries of masculine or feminine to simply "human" and "effective." This study provides a small window to a possible world in which ideals of servant-leadership are espoused by the most powerful leaders. As women's leadership experience continues to gain legitimacy and ways of leading, like servant-leadership, become more widely recognized, there is potential for servant-leadership to transform androcentric systems of organizing into gender-integrative systems.

Based on the attitudes observed in the speeches of the Fortune1000 and Power50 leaders, espousing servant-leadership can be considered a viable and desirable leadership option for top executives of high performing businesses in a competitive corporate environment. Although some differences in framing their servant-leadership approaches can be observed, overall, these differences are subtle and in the larger picture the servant-leadership practices and attitudes are present in women and men. Both successful female and male

executives espoused some aspects of servant-leadership and integrated both communal and agentic gendered aspects of servant-leadership. By virtue of this gender-integrative potential, any person, male, female or other-gendered may be successful with a servant-leadership attitude and practice. Much more research still needs to be done to understand which aspects of leadership (if any) give women the edge and whether women executives' leadership contributes something unique to business outcomes.

The female executives of the Fortune1000 and Power50 broke through the glass ceiling, and in this study many of them did so while espousing aspects of servant-leadership. Although there may be a business case for promoting women to executive positions, the social justice case should be more compelling (Reynolds, 2016). There is more at stake than the immediate benefits to women of having more female top executives and to the business world embracing servant-leadership. Simply promoting women and adopting servant-leadership-driven development programs will not necessarily remedy the deeply rooted underlying gender bias that infuses society and the androcentric matrix of profit-driven organizational cultures. The first step towards transformation is awareness: a call to action for explicit discussion of gendered reality. It remains the task of servant-leadership scholars to provide foresight and initiate an intentionally gender-integrative discourse of leading through serving, create and foster a gender-holistic model of leadership with the potential to forge gender-integrative organizations and open up the matrix for more representation of women in executive positions.

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