Servant Leadership: How Daily and General Behaviors Interact

Running Head: DAILY AND GENERAL SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Abstract

The present study takes a closer look at servant leadership from a daily diary perspective. We hypothesized daily servant leadership to positively relate to the follower resources self-efficacy and optimism. We further proposed that this relation should be attenuated if followers do not perceive their leaders to also lead servantly on a general basis. In a diary study, ninety-eight followers completed questionnaires over one week. Hierarchical linear modeling showed daily servant leadership to be associated with followers' daily self-efficacy but not with followers' daily optimism. Additionally, for the proposed interaction of daily servant leadership with general perceptions of servant leadership, results confirmed the proposed interaction for followers' daily optimism but not for daily self-efficacy.

Keywords: diary study, optimism, personal resources, self-efficacy, servant leadership

Servant leadership is defined as an "(1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (Eva et al., 2018, p. 114). It benefits followers (Chen et al., 2015), teams (Ehrhart, 2004), and organizations (Peterson et al., 2012) and has gained increased relevance in leadership research as a unique approach that moves beyond transformational, ethical, or authentic leadership (Brière et al., 2020; Hoch et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2020; Lemoine et al., 2019).

The focus on needs and growth makes servant leadership particularly relevant for followers' personal resources (van Dierendonck, 2011). In fact, general servant leadership perceptions have been linked to followers' personal resources such as self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2017), optimism (Hsiao et al., 2015; Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012), and self-esteem (Yang et al., 2018).

However, while leadership behavior consists of both a general, between-person component and a state-like, within-person component (Kelemen et al., 2020), prior research has treated servant leadership as rather constant. This static view is problematic since the strong focus on prioritizing followers' needs may be difficult to uphold over time (Eva et al., 2018; Liao et al., 2020). The importance of adding a short-term perspective is supported by recent findings on daily fluctuations in servant leadership (Liao et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Carvajal et al., 2019) and echoed in recent calls to explore within-personal fluctuations in servant leadership (Eva et al., 2018; Kelemen et al., 2020). Accordingly, we argue that servant leadership perceptions are prone to short-term fluctuations that explain followers' daily experiences. Moreover, both perspectives may interact as followers perceive their leaders' daily behaviors while having their leaders' general behaviors in mind. Therefore, in a second step, we focus on the interplay of daily and general servant leadership perceptions for followers' daily personal resources (i.e., self-efficacy, optimism).

Our research makes two main contributions. First, we contribute to a better understanding of short-term fluctuations in servant leadership. Although within- and between-person leadership processes explain different parts of variance (McCormick et al., 2020), explorations of daily servant leadership are scarce (exceptions are Liao et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Carvajal et al., 2019). While some behavioral facets are readily observable from day-to-day (e.g., taking time to listen), others need a longer time period for unfolding their impact (e.g., behaving ethically).

Second, we integrate both daily and general servant leadership perceptions - an important omission in prior research. Following social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) we propose that daily servant leadership will only be beneficial if it reflects leaders' general behaviors at work (Liden et al., 2014).

Daily Perceptions of Servant Leadership and Followers' Personal Resources

Servant leadership reveals leaders' commitment to serve followers' needs, and to enable them to "improve for their own good" (Ehrhart, 2004, p. 69), which makes it highly relevant for followers' personal resources. Personal resources are "positive psychological resource capacities" (Youssef & Luthans, 2007, p. 776) that are malleable due to environmental factors such as leadership. They play a decisive role for the daily positive functioning at work (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).

We focus on two daily personal resources that have been linked to servant leadership in between-person research: self-efficacy and optimism (Chen et al., 2015; Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012). *Self-efficacy* describes individuals' confidence in their ability to succeed at challenging tasks (Bandura, 1997). *Optimism* captures individuals' attribution of positive events as being internal (Seligman, 1998). Together with hope and resiliency they form individuals' psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007). Although all of these personal resources are malleable to a certain extent, previous research (Tims et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009, 2012) and recent meta-analyses (McCormick et al., 2020;

Podsakoff et al., 2019) highlight meaningful short-term variability especially for self-efficacy and optimism which is why we focused on these resources in the present study.

Daily Servant Leadership and Daily Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy determines how people feel, think, and behave (Bandura, 1997). On a daily basis it promotes crucial behaviors such as work engagement and performance (Tims et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Self-efficacy can stem from four different sources (Bandura, 1977): Performance accomplishments (i.e., mastery experience despite of obstacles), verbal persuasion (i.e., confidence through verbal encouragement), vicarious experience (i.e., confidence through observing others), and emotional arousal.

We propose that daily perceptions of servant leadership should foster self-efficacy by promoting mastery experiences and through verbal persuasion. First, daily servant leadership enables *mastery experiences*, because it provides room for self-development and opportunities for goal-achievement on a given day (Liden et al., 2008). Further, perceiving daily empowering and support can strengthen followers' task effectiveness and thus foster their mastery experiences. Second, daily servant leadership provides *verbal persuasion* through leaders' encouragement of followers' strengths (van Dierendonck, 2011). Importantly, both leaders' encouragement of mastery experiences and verbal persuasion will vary from one day to another. Thus, we propose a daily relation between followers' perceptions of servant leadership and their self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 1: Daily perceptions of servant leadership positively relate to daily self-efficacy.

Daily Servant Leadership and Daily Optimism.

Optimistic employees "make positive attributions about succeeding now and in the future" (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 542) which is crucial for keeping up positive organizational behaviors on a day-to-day basis (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Optimism can be fostered by creating positive expectations through "identifying positive outcomes and successful activities

that would lead to personal goal attainment" (Luthans et al., 2008, p. 215). Servant leaders adopt daily behaviors that focus on follower-chosen goals and support strategies to achieve those (e.g., prioritizing followers' needs, offering support, providing freedom). Such behaviors are typically associated with high-quality coaching that has been shown to stimulate followers' daily optimism (Xanthopoulou et al., 2012). Accordingly, behaviors typically associated with servant leadership (e.g., empowering, exhibiting humility, showing acceptance) can strengthen followers' optimistic outlook on their future (Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012; van Dierendonck, 2011). We propose that daily servant leadership perceptions are positively associated with followers' optimism on that day.

Hypothesis 2: Daily perceptions servant leadership positively relate to daily optimism.

The Moderating Role of General Perceptions of Servant Leadership

Imagine that, in general, you do not perceive your leader to act servantly, however, on a specific day you see that your leader shows interest and support. According to social information processing theory, the social environment can make information about past activities more or less salient and can influence the way we perceive new information in an attention-shifting process (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Accordingly, followers' response to daily servant leadership may vary in dependence on their general leadership perceptions that formed over time. We argue that when, in general, followers perceive high levels of servant leadership they will be more responsive to leaders' daily servant leadership.

Regarding self-efficacy, followers will understand daily perceptions of verbal persuasion and support of mastery experience in the light of their general perceptions of their leader. For example, when provided with relevant knowledge on a given day, in the light of positive past experiences, followers will be willing to follow leaders' advice while, in the light of unfavorable past experiences, the same advice may be seen as expressing leaders' superiority and fail to foster daily self-efficacy.

Similarly, followers will form daily optimism only when experiencing their leaders' daily empowering behaviors in the light of their leaders' general focus to put followers' interests ahead of their own. By contrast, for followers who in general see their leaders to enact low levels of servant leadership, daily perceptions of leaders' empowering behaviors may not be understood as a genuine interest in followers' needs.

Hypothesis 3: Followers' general perception of servant leadership moderates the daily relationship between servant leadership and self-efficacy. The day-level association between servant leadership and self-efficacy will be dissolved when followers experience low levels of general servant leadership.

Hypothesis 4: Followers' general perception of servant leadership moderates the daily relationship between servant leadership and optimism. The day-level association of servant leadership and optimism will be dissolved when followers experience low levels of general servant leadership.

Method

Procedure and Participants

As part of a larger research project[1], we recruited participants via the professional panel provider Respondi (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2013) that rewards participants via bonus points that can be exchanged in gift vouchers. Panel providers are reliable (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Landers & Behrend, 2015; Walter et al., 2019), particularly when carefully evaluating the sample appropriateness (Cheung et al., 2017). We thus specified that participants had to (1) work a minimum of 20 weekly hours, (2) interact with their supervisors on a daily basis, and (3) hold an academic degree to prevent high drop-out rates (Lee et al., 2004).

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[1] Two prior publications were in parts based on the same data set: (1) masked version - citation to be included; (2) masked version - citation to be included.

We applied one general survey (general perceptions of servant leadership, between-person controls, socio-demographics) followed by one week of daily surveys (Monday to Friday) which aligns with the requirements for diary studies (Ohly et al., 2010). Out of 289 participants who started the general survey, 286 completed this survey.

For the daily surveys, we applied the following selection criteria. First, we included participants that had completed at least two pairs of daily questionnaires and their consecutive workdays. Second, for valid measures of daily servant leadership, we included days on which participants had interacted more than 5 minutes with their supervisors. Third, for valid momentary assessments after work we included days on which the questionnaires had been completed without interruptions and not later than 9 pm. Initially, 170 participants completed a minimum of one daily questionnaire and its consecutive workday. Excluding days with 5 or less minutes of interaction time resulted in 128 participants. Excluding days with interrupted questionnaires and completion after 9 pm resulted in 121 participants. Finally, including only participants with a minimum of two pairs of daily questionnaires and their consecutive workdays, resulted in a final sample of 98 participants and 297 assessments.

In order to rule out biases due to systematic dropout, we tested for differences in the person-level variables between participants included in our final sample (N = 98) and those that had completed the general survey but were not included in our analyses (N = 188). Results of t-tests revealed no difference with respect to servant leadership ($t = 1.34$, $p = .18$), optimism ($t = .14$, $p = .91$), and self-efficacy ($t = 1.14$, $p = .25$).

Participants' mean age was 43.05 years ($SD = 10.86$) and 58.2% were male (female: 41.8%). Participants worked in various industries (e.g., IT, communication, public services, etc.), had an average organizational tenure of 11.62 years ($SD = 10.84$) and a relational tenure with their leaders of 4.75 years ($SD = 5.91$). Their mean weekly contractual work time was 38.55 hours ($SD = 4.59$). On an average workday, most participants directly interacted with

their leaders for 31 to 30 minutes (32.7%) or for 16 to 30 minutes (31.6%; 6–15 min: 17.3%;

1–2 hours: 15.3%, above 2 hours: 3.1%).

Measures

Following recommendations (Fisher & To, 2012; Gabriel et al., 2019) we applied

shortened measures. All scales were administered in German, adapted to the day-level, and

measured with five-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally*

agree).

Daily Servant Leadership

We adapted four items from Ehrhart (2004) to measure daily perceptions of servant

leadership. Ehrhart (2004) operationalization has been widely used (Adiguzel et al., 2020;

Hartnell et al., 2020; Neubert et al., 2016; Walumbwa et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2017), and

represents one of the two most prominent measures with high similarity to the measure by

Liden et al. (2008; Lemoine et al., 2019). The scale encompasses seven behavioral categories

(i.e., forming relationships with subordinates, empowering subordinates, helping subordinates

grow and succeed, behaving ethically, having conceptual skills, putting subordinates first, and

creating value for those outside of the organization) that are combined into one overall servant

leadership construct.

We selected four items based on a pilot study with 63 managers according to factor

loadings and aptitude for day-level assessment. Starting with "Today, my supervisor" the

items were: "worked hard at finding ways to help others be the best they can be"; "created a

sense of community among the team members"; "made me feel like I work with him/her, not

for him/her"; "made the personal development of team members a priority." Cronbach's α for

daily servant leadership ranged from .92 to .93 ($M = .92$).

Daily Self-Efficacy

We adopted three items from Schwarzer et al. (1997) to measure participants' daily

self-efficacy with respect to their work. We selected the items based on prior diary research

(Xanthopoulou et al., 2012) and according to the highest factor loading (Scholz et al., 2002).

Example item: "Today, I was confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events".

Cronbach's α for daily self-efficacy ranged from .77 to .87 ($M = .82$).

Daily Optimism

We measured daily optimism after work with two items from the validated German

version (Glaesmer et al., 2008) of the Life Orientation Test Revised (LOT-R; Scheier et al.,

1994), which aligns prior research (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Example item: "Right now,

after work I expect on overall more good things to happen to me than bad". Spearman Brown

coefficients (Eisinga et al., 2013) ranged from .85 to .91 ($M = .88$).

General Servant Leadership

General perceptions of servant leadership were measured with the same items from

Ehrhart (2004) as in the day-level questionnaires, adapted to the general level. Cronbach's α

was .92.

Control Variables

Between persons, we controlled for age and gender both of which have been linked

with self-efficacy (Maurer, 2001; West et al., 2002) and optimism (Chowdhury et al., 2014;

Palgi et al., 2011). We controlled for average interaction time as this may relate to followers'

perceptions of general servant leadership via adopting a categorical item from Bakker and

Xanthopoulou (2009) to the general level ("On an average workday, how much time do you

spend in direct interaction (e.g., phone, meetings etc.) with your supervisor?") with six

categories: 0–5 min., 6–15 min., 16–30 min., 31–60 min., 1–2 hours, more than 2 hours.

At the day-level, we controlled for the day of the week (Beal & Weiss, 2003; Gabriel

et al., 2019) to rule out weekly rhythms (e.g., more optimism on Mondays). Furthermore, we

controlled for time pressure (ISTA; Semmer et al., 1999) as a possible third variable (e.g.,

daily stress may affect both followers' perceptions of servant leadership and self-efficacy and

optimism, respectively), and again interaction time with the categorical item, this time

referring to daily perception (one item measure; Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009).

Data Analysis

We applied multilevel regression analyses based on the HLM 7 software (Raudenbush

et al., 2008). We person-mean centered the day-level predictors and control variables (Gabriel

et al., 2019; Ohly et al., 2010) for estimating true within-person effects. Due to conceptual

reasons, we did not center the day of the week. We grand-mean centered the between-person

variables in order to eliminate between–person confounds and increase the interpretability of

parameters.

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Results[2]

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Construct Validity

In order to ensure the distinctiveness of daily servant leadership, optimism, and self-

efficacy, we conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analyses with MLR estimator via

Mplus 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). Results showed a good fit for the proposed three-

factor solution ($\chi2$ (24, 297) = 44.864, $p < .05$, RMSEA = .054, CFI = 0.982) and supported

its superiority over a single-factor model ($\chi2$ (27, 297) = 443.604, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .228,

CFI = 0.636; $\chi2_{diff}$ = 185.059, $p < .001$) and the best fitting two-factor model with servant

leadership and optimism loading on the same factor ($\chi2$ (26, 297) = 241.296, $p < .001$,

RMSEA = .167, CFI = .812; $\chi2_{diff}$ = 87.489, $p < .001$).

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and reliabilities for all study variables.

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[2] Results stayed the same with or without the inclusion of control variables. Also, adding daily
transformational leadership as additional control variable did not change the results
underlining the distinctiveness of daily servant leadership in comparison to other leadership
styles.

Partitioning the total variance of day-level variables into within- and between-person components (ICC) revealed considerable within-person variance (37% for servant leadership, 56% for self-efficacy, 28% for optimism; cf. Table 2 and 3).

Test of Hypotheses

To test Hypothesis 1 and 2, we compared three nested models respectively: The null model only included the intercept, Model 1 included the control variables and Model 2 included general servant leadership. Finally, Model 3 included the predictor variable daily servant leadership. To test Hypotheses 3 and 4, we compared five nested models. The first three models were the same as when testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively. In Model 4, we added a random slope to the random intercept model, which is recommended as an intermediate step when testing cross-level interactions (Aguinis et al., 2013). Finally, in Model 5, we included the interaction term of daily and trait-level servant leadership. We compared models by calculating differences in the likelihood ratio.

The Daily Relationship Between Servant Leadership and Personal Resources (Hypothesis 1 and 2)

For self-efficacy, including servant leadership in Model 3 yielded model improvement ($\Delta - 2$ x log = 9.01, *df* = 1, *p* < .01) with servant leadership predicting self-efficacy (*t* = 3.04, *p* < .01; cf. Table 2). On days on which followers perceived high levels of servant leadership, they experienced high self-efficacy, supporting Hypothesis 1.

For optimism, the inclusion of servant leadership into Model 3 did not yield model improvement ($\Delta - 2$ x log = .43, *df* = 1, *ns*). Daily perceptions of servant leadership did not predict followers' daily optimism (*t* =.66, *ns; cf. Table 3*). Thus, hypothesis 2 was not supported.

The Moderating Role of General Servant Leadership (Hypothesis 3 and 4)

For self-efficacy, adding the random slope (Model 4) did not yield model improvement ($\Delta - 2$ x log = 2.90, *df* = 2, *ns*). As estimates derived from this procedure tend to

be too conservative, we followed the methodical recommendations (Aguinis et al., 2013) and practical examples (Pachler et al., 2018) and tested the hypothesized cross-level interaction. Including the interaction term in Model 5 did not result in an improvement over Model 4 ($\Delta - 2 \times \log = 3.47$, $df = 1$, $p = .059$). The prediction of daily self-efficacy by the interaction term did not reach significance and was only marginal ($t = 2.47$, $p = 0.053$; cf. Table 2). Thus, hypothesis 3 was not supported.

For optimism, adding a random slope (Model 4) also did not result in a model improvement over Model 3 ($\Delta - 2 \times \log = 3.34$, $df = 2$, ns). Nevertheless, following the rationale described above, we tested the hypothesized interaction by including the interaction term in Model 5. As expected, Model 5 showed a significant improvement ($\Delta - 2 \times \log = 8.29$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$) with the interaction term predicting daily optimism ($t = 2.93$, $p < 0.001$; cf. Table 3). In line with Hypothesis 4, simple slope analyses showed that for high levels of general servant leadership (1 SD above the mean), daily servant leadership positively predicted daily optimism (estimate = .18; $SE = 0.08$, $t = 2.13$, $p < .05$). Going beyond our original predictions, for low levels of general servant leadership (1 SD below the mean), daily servant leadership was negatively associated with daily optimism (estimate = -.17; $SE = 0.08$, $t = -2.08$, $p < .05$.). The interaction is illustrated in Figure 1.

Discussion

This study examined the interplay between daily and general perceptions of servant leadership and its effects on followers' daily resources self-efficacy and optimism.

Complementing prior between-person research (Chen et al., 2015) our findings showed that followers daily perceptions of servant leadership link to their daily experience of self-efficacy. That underlines the meaningful effects of servant leadership for followers' resources from day-to-day (e.g., by daily verbal persuasion). By contrast, daily perceptions of servant leadership were not associated with followers' optimism on that day, highlighting the

need to identify boundary conditions. It has to be noted that optimism had less within-person variance than self-efficacy which may at least in parts explain the non-significant relationship.

Our findings supported general perceptions of servant leadership as a boundary condition in the functioning of daily servant leadership for daily optimism, which aligns information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Specifically, for daily optimism, daily servant leadership perceptions needed to be grounded in generally high levels of servant leadership that come along with followers' trust (Chan & Mak, 2014). Going beyond our expectations, when followers in general perceived low levels of servant leadership, their daily servant leadership perceptions resulted in even less optimism. That is, in light of low general servant leadership, followers may misinterpret leaders' daily positive intentions (e.g., the leader appears to be rather suddenly interested in followers' needs). By contrast, for daily self-efficacy, the moderating effect of general servant leadership was only marginal and did not reach significance highlighting the crucial role of day-to-day servant leadership behavior for followers' daily self-efficacy.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation concerns the self-report data at a single time point and the related risk of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although we separated assessments of trait- and day-level servant leadership and group-mean centered all day-level predictors, any causal inferences have to be drawn with caution. As Gabriel et al. (2019) point out, this is a rather common limitation in experience sampling studies. Following their advice, we controlled for potential weekly patterns (e.g., more personal resources on Mondays) and daily stress as an alternative explanation. The results stayed the same with and without both control variables which strengthens our results.

Future research could address the issue of common method variance in two ways: First, future research could separate the measurement occasions (e.g., by collecting additional data in the morning; Tremmel et al., 2019). That way, future research could examine if the

effects of daily servant leadership persist overnight and predict an optimistic outlook the next day. Second, future research could account for transient mood states as alternative explanation (Gabriel et al., 2019). Servant leadership likely fosters positive affective experiences (e.g., positive effects on emotional labor are reported by Lu et al., 2019) so that affect may be more than a control variable but rather be substantively important as a mediator. In fact, affect is crucial for building personal resources (Broaden and Build Theory; Fredrickon, 1998) and future research could include daily affect as a central mechanism in predicting daily resources.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our results have implications for research as they underline the need to take both general and daily servant leadership into account. Moreover, future research could examine specific day-to-day leadership behaviors reflective of servant leadership. Some behavioral facets of servant leadership should be especially apt to be shown on a daily basis whereas others have to be shown over longer periods of time.

Our findings allow cautious practical recommendations. As daily servant leadership behaviors leaders may apply short feedback in the form of daily check-ins with individual followers to support followers' self-efficacy. Leaders may further create a sense of community by emphasizing shared goals and by applying we-referencing language. This helps followers to understand that the leader is one of them and that they work with instead of for the leader (Steffens et al., 2014). Furthermore, leadership education should help leaders to focus on both daily (e.g., listening to followers, showing empathy) and more general and long-term servant leadership behaviors (e.g., fostering individuals' growth, building a sense of community).

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