

## **How Distinct is Servant Leadership Theory? Empirical Comparisons with Competing Theories**

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*Relationships between servant leadership theory and the more empirically supported theories of transformational leadership and transactional leadership were examined using questionnaire data from 207 employees. Employees' perceptions of their supervisors' servant leadership were found to be positively related not only to employees' perceptions of their supervisors' transformational leadership but also their supervisors' transactional contingent reward leadership and transactional active management-by-exception leadership. Perceived servant leadership was negatively related to both perceived transactional passive management-by-exception leadership and laissez faire leadership. It appears that servant leadership theory shares much in common with other modern theories of leadership, especially transformational leadership theory.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The topic of servant leadership has received growing attention in the leadership literature. First introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1977, servant leadership emphasizes the good of followers over the self-interest of the leader by (a) valuing and developing people, (b) practicing authenticity in leadership, (c) building community, (d) providing leadership for the good of followers, and (e) sharing status and power for the common good of followers, the total organization, and persons served by the organization (Laub, 1999). Since its conceptual inception, servant leadership has been espoused by a growing number of researchers as a valid theory of organizational leadership (Chin & Smith, 2006; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Neubert, Carlson, Roberts, Kacmar, & Chonko, 2008; Russell & Stone, 2002; Tebeian, 2012; Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011).

The surge of empirical and practical interest in servant leadership theory can be attributed to a movement away from traditional hierarchical and patriarchal leadership (Crippen, 2005; Nwogu, 2004). Traditional hierarchical leadership is often represented by a pyramid model characterized by a top-down authority structure with leaders located at the top and all decisions flowing from the top down to organizational members (Magoni, 2003). Such a traditional model of leadership clearly indicates that organizational members are expected to serve their leaders (see Sergiovanni, 2000). In direct opposition

to the pyramid model, the inverted pyramid calls for leaders to be located at the bottom of the organizational pyramid in order to serve the organization. Consequently, the inverted pyramid model is the essence of servant leadership—that is, leadership emphasizing the good of followers over the self-interest of the leader (Laub, 1999).

The emergence of this approach to leadership was further articulated by Spears (1995), who explained that as the end of the twentieth century approached, traditional autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership were slowly yielding to a newer model of leadership—a model that attempted to enhance the personal growth of workers and improve the quality of organizations through personal involvement in decision making, a combination of teamwork and community, and ethical and caring behavior. Like many other leadership thinkers, Spears referred to this emerging approach to leadership and service as servant leadership.

In recent years, research on servant leadership has begun to shift from primarily anecdotal support to empirical validation. Various authors have contributed to the literature through the development of servant leadership measures and assessments (i.e., Liden et al., 2008; Reed, Vidaver-Cohen, & Colwell, 2011; and Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). In 2013, Parriss and Peachey completed a systematic review of 39 studies on servant leadership. They noted that despite the increasing efforts to develop tools to measure the construct, only a limited number of studies had empirically examined the concept.

The purpose of the current study was to advance the empirical support regarding the distinctiveness of servant leadership theory by exploring the relationship between servant leadership and two of the most popular leadership theories currently being discussed by researchers—transformational leadership and transactional leadership (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004).

## **BACKGROUND OF SERVANT, TRANSFORMATIONAL, AND TRANSACTIONAL THEORIES**

### **Servant Leadership Theory**

Greenleaf (1977) suggested a first-among-equals approach to leadership as “key to [a servant leader’s] greatness” (p. 21). Thus, servant leadership places the leader in a non-focal position within a group such that resources and support are provided to followers without expectation of acknowledgement (Smith et al., 2004). Unlike traditional leaders who are primarily motivated by aspirations to lead, servant leaders are motivated more by a desire to serve than to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). In their review, Parriss and Peachey (2013) noted that despite increasing interest in servant leadership, it remains ill defined. Such lack of clarity in definition leaves authors grappling with how to operationalize the theory. Based on their 2002 review, Russell and Stone identified nine core functional attributes of the theory plus 11 supportive attributes. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) integrated the attributes into five factors. Van Dierendonck (2011) conceptualized the model with six key characteristics.

In their review, Parriss and Peachey (2013) found 14 different instruments that have been developed to examine servant leadership. Most of these instruments focus on the unit level of analysis, while only a few (e.g., the Liden et al., 2008, instrument) focus on the individual level of analysis. The Liden et al. analysis developed a seven-factor model of servant leadership: (1) conceptual skill, (2) empowering others, (3) helping subordinates grow and succeed, (4) putting subordinates first, (5) behaving ethically, (6) emotional healing, and (7) creating value for the community.

### **Transformational and Transactional Leadership Theories**

Unlike servant leadership theory, transformational leadership and transactional leadership theories have been investigated in numerous empirical studies since Burns (1978) first introduced the concepts. Burns considered leaders to be either transformational or transactional, while others such as Bass (1985) viewed leadership as a continuum with transformational leadership on one end and transactional leadership on the other end. The following sections offer a brief background of these two leadership models.

### *Transformational Leadership Theory*

According to Judge and Piccolo (2004), transformational leadership has proven to be a most popular research topic in leadership literature, given that more studies have been conducted on transformational leadership than on all other popular leadership theories combined. The most widely researched version of transformational leadership theory was developed by Bass (1985), who stated that transformational leadership:

occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their self-interest for the good of the group. (Bass, 1990, p. 21)

In essence, transformational leaders build commitment to organizational objectives and empower followers to accomplish objectives (Yukl, 2006) by: (a) making followers aware of the importance of task outcomes, (b) orienting followers toward performance beyond established organizational standards, (c) activating higher-order intrinsic needs, and (d) focusing on follower empowerment instead of dependence (Bass, 1985; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993).

Judge and Piccolo (2004) contend that transformational leadership includes four dimensions—individualized consideration, idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation. Individualized consideration involves leaders providing mentorship and coaching to followers in order to attend to followers' concerns and needs. Idealized influence is the charismatic component of transformational leadership in which leaders are respected, admired, and ultimately emulated by followers (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1994). These charismatic leaders appeal to followers' emotions and arouse identification with the leaders by displaying convictions (Judge & Piccolo, 2004) such as the value of integrity and ethical and moral conduct (Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Furthermore, a key component of idealized influence is the development and communication of a shared vision that inspires followers to align their individual interests and values with those of the leader and the organization (Jung & Avolio, 2000).

Akin to idealized influence is inspirational motivation, which emphasizes passionate communication of an appealing and inspiring organizational vision that can be shared (Hater & Bass, 1988). By modeling appropriate behaviors and using symbols to focus followers' efforts (Bass & Avolio, 1990), leaders with inspirational motivation provide meaning for tasks, challenge followers with high standards, and communicate optimism about future goal attainment (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Intellectual stimulation is a transformational leadership behavior that increases follower awareness of problems and encourages followers to view old and familiar issues from new perspectives (Bass, 1985). Leaders who utilize intellectual stimulation solicit followers' ideas, challenge assumptions, take risks, and stimulate creativity in followers (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Given the potential similarities between components of transformational leadership and servant leadership (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2003), later sections of this article develop propositions about potential associations between these two leadership approaches.

### *Transactional Leadership Theory*

Viewed as more commonplace than transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), transactional leadership is described as an exchange process in which leaders recognize followers' needs and then define appropriate exchange processes to meet both the needs of the followers and leaders' expectations (Bass, 1985). Such leadership relies on hierarchical authority, task completion, and rewards and punishments (Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Transactional leadership can result in follower compliance; however, since the transactional leader primarily emphasizes giving followers something they want in return for something the leader wants, transactional leadership is not likely to generate great enthusiasm and commitment among followers (Bass, 1985).

Forms of transactional leadership include contingent reward leadership, management-by-exception that is active or passive, and laissez faire leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Bass (1985) differentiated contingent reward and management-by-exception according to the leader's level of activity and

engagement with followers. Contingent reward behavior involves clarification of expectations and tasks required to obtain rewards, as well as the use of negotiated incentives.

Management-by-exception behavior is the degree to which leaders enforce rules to avoid mistakes and take corrective action on the basis of results of leader-follower transactions (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Transactional leaders who practice management-by-exception focus on followers' mistakes and intervene only after work standards have not been met. Active management-by-exception involves leaders actively monitoring follower performance in order to anticipate deviations from standards prior to their becoming problems (Hater & Bass, 1988). On the other hand, leaders who practice passive management-by-exception wait until followers' behaviors have created problems before they take corrective action against obvious deviations from performance standards. In either of the two cases of management-by-exception, leaders emphasize the use of tactics such as discipline, punishment, and negative feedback to foster desirable performance (Bass & Avolio, 1993).

Transactional leadership in the form of laissez faire leadership is described as a leader's lack of guidance to followers and disregard of supervisory duties (Bradford & Lippitt, 1945). According to Bass (1985), such non-leadership involves the leader taking no initiative to meet followers' needs and actually withdrawing when deviations occur. As a result, laissez faire leadership is often referred to as the least active and least effective leadership style (Barbuto, 2005).

## **COMPARING THE THEORIES**

### **Servant Leadership Theory Versus Transformational Leadership Theory**

Researchers have raised questions about whether or not theories of servant leadership and transformational leadership are related. Questions may stem from the thought that both theories describe people-oriented, moral, and inspirational approaches to leadership (Graham, 1991) that emphasize the importance of valuing, mentoring, and empowering followers (Smith et al., 2004). In fact, Graham (1991) and Smith and colleagues (2004) argued both approaches are rooted in charismatic leadership theory, which calls for leaders to exercise power through followers' belief in and identification with the personalities of the leaders.

Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) noted that the transformational leadership model presented by Burns (1978) parallels Greenleaf's (1977) model of servant leadership with corresponding values of human rights, justice and equity. Similarly, Stone et al. (2003) argued that servant leadership and transformational leadership both incorporate characteristics such as respect, vision, influence, modeling, trust, integrity, and delegation. Stone and colleagues noted that servant leadership and transformational leadership are likely to be most similar in their emphasis on individualized appreciation and consideration of followers.

Likewise, Smith and colleagues (2004) argued that at the level of theoretical dimensions, transformational leadership's idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration corresponded with components of servant leadership. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

*Hypothesis 1: Employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be positively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' transformational leadership.*

### **Servant Leadership Theory Versus Transactional Leadership Theory**

Servant leadership and transactional leadership are distinguishable in a number of ways. Servant leaders emphasize activities that demonstrate concern about followers' well-being, while transactional leaders focus on the routine maintenance activities of allocating resources and monitoring and directing followers in order to achieve organizational goals (Kanungo, 2001). Servant leaders gain influence in a nontraditional manner that originates from servanthood (Russell & Stone, 2002); as a result, followers are given a measure of freedom to exercise their own abilities. Unlike the servant leader who influences

followers through personal development and empowerment, the transactional leader influences followers through the use of rewards, sanctions, and formal authority and position to induce compliant behavior.

While servant leaders work in various ways to uplift the morale and motivation of followers, transactional leaders cater primarily to short-term self-interests of followers (see Bass, 1999). Servant leaders use influence strategies that consider followers' values, norms, and attitudes and that empower followers, while transactional leaders utilize rewards, punishments, and formal authority to induce compliant behavior.

Unlike servant leaders, transactional leaders serve their personal interests (e.g., material benefits, status, power) by requiring followers to demonstrate behaviors compliant with the leaders' expectations (Kanungo, 2001). The control strategies used by transactional leaders do not permit follower empowerment, autonomy, and development (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996) as afforded by servant leadership.

### **Servant Leadership Versus Contingent Reward Leadership**

Leaders who practice transactional contingent reward leadership reflect behavior further distinguishing transactional leadership from servant leadership. According to Blanchard and Johnson (1985), transactional leaders create strong expectations for employee work behaviors, along with clear indications of rewards employees will receive in exchange for meeting transactional leaders' expectations. Transactional leaders work to induce compliant behavior by not only using rewards but also sanctions and formal authority—all influence strategies contradicting the empowerment strategies emphasized by servant leaders.

*Hypothesis 2: Employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' contingent reward leadership.*

### **Servant Leadership Versus Management-By-Exception Leadership**

Leaders who practice transactional active or passive management-by-exception also demonstrate behavior that distinguishes transactional leadership from servant leadership. Transactional leaders who practice management-by-exception do not involve themselves with followers until deviations from work standards occur (Bass, 1985; 1990). Such leaders intervene only when corrective action is necessary, and the leaders arrange actions to correct specific failures. Passive leaders wait until followers' behaviors have created problems before they take corrective action against obvious deviations from performance standards. On the other hand, active leaders monitor follower performance in order to anticipate deviations from standards prior to their becoming problems (Hater & Bass, 1988). Both active and passive management-by-exception emphasize the use of tactics such as discipline, punishment, and negative feedback (Bass & Avolio, 1993) and other influence strategies that oppose the empowerment tactics embraced in servant leadership.

*Hypothesis 3: Employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' active management-by-exception leadership.*

*Hypothesis 4: Employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' passive management-by-exception leadership.*

### **Servant Leadership Versus Laissez Faire Leadership**

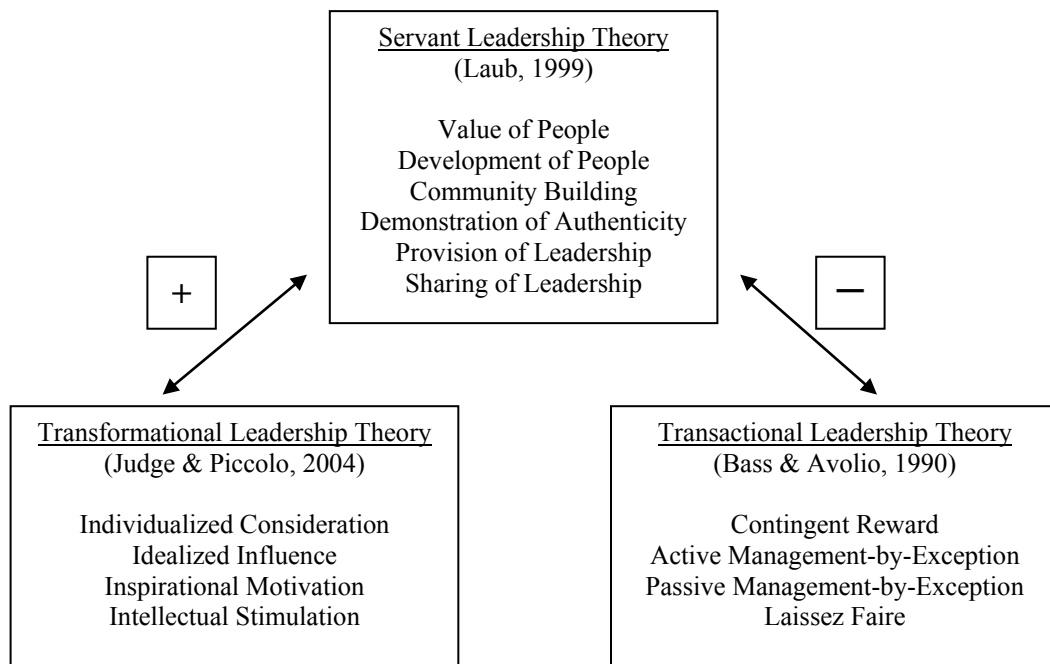
Laissez faire leaders distinguish themselves from servant leaders by the laissez faire leaders' lack of involvement in their leadership of followers (Bradford & Lippit, 1945). Unlike servant leaders who are primarily driven by the interests of followers, laissez faire leaders do not consider nor work to meet the needs of followers—even when action is necessary (Bass, 1985). In contrast with servant leaders' focus

on active participation in the development of followers, laissez faire leaders are defined by overall inactivity in relationships with followers (Barbuto, 2005).

*Hypothesis 5: Employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' laissez faire leadership.*

See Figure 1 for a diagram of the relationships proposed in the current study.

**FIGURE 1**  
**A DIAGRAM OF THE RELATIONSHIPS PROPOSED IN THE CURRENT STUDY**



## METHOD

### Sample and Setting

Questionnaire data were gathered from 207 employees in five public and private sector organizations in the Southern U.S. The organizations included a daycare center, a community foundation, a newspaper, and two municipal public works facilities (each public works facility was located in a different state). A multi-organizational sample was used in the study to enhance the variation and generalizability of responses. Table 1 summarizes subsample sizes, response rates, and demographic information.

Seventy-nine percent of the participants were male, 44% were European American, and 52% were African American. The average age was 45. On average, participants had worked in their current jobs for 5.2 years and worked in their current organizations 10.5 years. Of the 473 employees invited to participate in the study, 207 (44%) completed the questionnaire. The few missing values in the data were imputed by a regression method, which replaces a missing value with the linear trend (predicted value) for that point based on regression analyses of existing values. Since a small percentage of missing values was imputed, sample variances should not underestimate population variance.

## Procedure

A questionnaire was administered to all employees in order to capture employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership, transformational leadership, and transactional leadership behaviors. All questionnaires were administered to respondents via personal delivery by the first author

**TABLE 1**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION BY SAMPLE**

Variable	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Sample 4	Sample 5
Organization	Daycare	Foundation	Newspaper	Public Works I	Public Works II
<i>N</i>	5	4	1	186	11
% response rate	22	100	50	49	18
Education					
% Less than HS degree	0	0	0	8.1	18.2
% High school degree	40	0	0	31.2	27.3
% Some college but no college degree	20	25	0	39.8	36.4
% Junior college or associate degree	0	0	0	14	0
% Bachelor's/undergraduate college degree	0	50	0	3.2	18.2
% Bachelor's degree and some graduate work	0	0	0	1.6	0
% Master's/graduate Degree	0	0	0	1.6	0
% Master's degree and some doctorate work	20	25	0	0.5	0
% Doctorate	20	0	100	0	0
Ethnicity					
% African American	100	75	0	46.8	100
% Asian American	0	0	0	0.5	0
% European American	0	25	100	47.3	0
% Hispanic American	0	0	0	1.6	0
% Native American	0	0	0	1.1	0
% Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0.5	0
% Other	0	0	0	2.2	0
Gender					
% Female	100	100	100	17.7	9.1
% Male	0	0	0	82.3	90.9
Mean age (years)	36 (3.49)	24.50 (0.58)	63 (0.00)	45.5 (2.15)	43.5 (2.51)
Mean job/position tenure (in years)	2.02 (0.83)	1.17 (0.77)	23 (0.00)	5.37 (5.68)	3.29 (3.20)
Mean organization tenure (in years)	2.02 (0.83)	1.17 (0.77)	23 (0.00)	10.84 (8.69)	10.45 (8.80)

*Note.* Standard deviations are shown in parentheses.

and/or designated personnel. A labeled box or folder was placed in the buildings for completed questionnaires to be returned by given deadlines. All questionnaires were administered in a similar manner in order to minimize variance that could be attributable to measurement methods rather than constructs of interest (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2004).

To minimize common method bias due to cross-sectional self-reporting, a delay was adopted between data collection points for different constructs from the same sources (Avolio, Yammarino, & Bass, 1991). To discourage and minimize social desirability in responses, respondents were assured by both the researcher and leaders of the sampled organizations that complete confidentiality would be maintained. Respondents were also assured that there were no right or wrong answers to questionnaire items. These steps helped to reduce the likelihood of respondents editing responses to be more socially desirable or even consistent with how they think the researchers or organizational leaders may have wanted them to respond.

## **Measures**

### *Servant Leadership*

Servant leadership was measured using the Liden et al. (2008) 28-item servant leadership instrument. The scale measures employee perceptions of seven dimensions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership: (a) emotional healing, which is the act of showing sensitivity to others' personal concerns; (b) creating value for the community, or demonstrating genuine concern for helping the community; (c) conceptual skills, which include knowledge of the organization and relevant tasks so as to be in a position to effectively support followers; (d) empowering, or encouraging and facilitating followers in problem-solving and in determining when and how to complete work tasks; (e) helping subordinates grow and succeed, which involves the demonstration of genuine concern for followers' career development by providing mentorship and support; (f) putting subordinates first, or clarifying to followers that meeting followers' work needs is a priority; and (g) behaving ethically, which involves interacting openly, fairly, and honestly with followers. Respondents rated agreement with each of the 28 items on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 7 representing "strongly agree." The items were altered slightly to fit the specific context of the study. Sample items are, "My immediate supervisor cares about my personal well-being." "My immediate supervisor gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best." "My immediate supervisor puts my best interests ahead of his/her own." Cronbach's alpha for each dimension are: conceptual skills ( $\alpha = .80$ ); empowerment ( $\alpha = .79$ ); helping subordinates grow and succeed ( $\alpha = .82$ ); putting subordinates first ( $\alpha = .86$ ); behaving ethically ( $\alpha = .83$ ); emotional healing ( $\alpha = .76$ ); creating value for the community ( $\alpha = .83$ ) (Liden et al., 2008). Since overall servant leadership was tested in the current study, each servant leadership score represented the average response across all 28 items. Cronbach's alpha for the overall servant leadership measure in the current study is .97.

### *Transformational Leadership*

Transformational leadership was measured using 20 items from Avolio and Bass' (2004) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ—Form 5X). The MLQ is one of the most widely used instruments employed to measure transformational leadership (Tejeda, Scandura, & Pillai, 2001). Each item rates how frequently specific behaviors are demonstrated by managers, supervisors, and top leaders in the organization. The items measure the four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. A 5-point Likert scale was used for rating the frequency of the observed leader behaviors, with 0 representing "not at all" and 4 representing "frequently, if not always." The items were altered slightly to fit the specific context of the study. Example items are, "My immediate supervisor: (a) talks about his or her most important values and beliefs, (b) talks enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished, and (c) re-examines critical assumptions to question whether they are appropriate." Cronbach's alpha is .73 for eight idealized influence items, .83 for four inspirational motivation items, .75 for five intellectual stimulation items, and .77 for three individualized consideration items (Avolio & Bass, 2004). In the current study, Cronbach's



alpha is .92 for the idealized influence items, .87 for the inspirational motivation items, .90 for the intellectual stimulation items, and .77 for the individualized consideration items. Since overall transformational leadership was tested in the current study, each transformational leadership score represented the average response across all 20 items. Cronbach's alpha for the overall transformational leadership measure in the current study is .96.

### *Transactional Leadership*

Transactional leadership was measured using 16 items from Avolio and Bass' (2004) MLQ—Form 5X, an instrument commonly used to measure transactional leadership (Tejeda et al., 2001). Each item rates how frequently specific behaviors are demonstrated by managers, supervisors, and top leaders in the organization. The items measure the four dimensions of transactional leadership: contingent reward, active management-by-exception, passive management-by-exception, and laissez faire. A 5-point Likert scale was used for rating the frequency of the observed leader behaviors, with 0 representing “not at all” and 4 representing “frequently, if not always.” The items were altered slightly to fit the specific context of the study. Sample items are, “My immediate supervisor: (a) provides me with assistance in exchange for my efforts, (b) waits for things to go wrong before taking action, (c) focuses attention on irregularities, mistakes, exceptions, and deviations from standards, and (d) avoids getting involved when important issues arise.” Cronbach's alpha is .69 for four contingent reward items, .75 for four active management-by-exception items, .70 for four passive management-by-exception items, and .71 for four laissez faire leadership items (Avolio & Bass, 2004). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha is .85 for the contingent reward items, .74 for the active management-by-exception items, .66 for the passive management-by-exception items, and .83 for the laissez faire items. Since each dimension of transactional leadership was tested in the current study, each transactional leadership score represented the average responses across items for each of the four dimensions.

### **Data Analysis**

Regression analysis was used to estimate the relationships between supervisors' perceived servant leadership and transformational leadership, contingent reward leadership, active management-by-exception leadership, passive management-by-exception leadership, and laissez faire leadership. Table 2 reports the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the study variables, and Table 3 reports the regression results. Hypothesis 1 predicted employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be positively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' transformational leadership. Transformational leadership was positively related to servant leadership ( $\beta = .86, p < .01$ ) and accounted for over 70% of the variance in servant leadership ( $R^2 = .73$ ). Hypothesis 2 predicted employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' contingent reward leadership. Surprisingly, contingent reward leadership was positively related to servant leadership ( $\beta = .80, p < .01$ ) and accounted for 65% of the variance in servant leadership ( $R^2 = .65$ ). Hypothesis 3 predicted employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership will be negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' active management-by-exception leadership. However, active management-by-exception was positively related to servant leadership ( $\beta = .38, p < .01$ ) and accounted for 14% of the variance in servant leadership ( $R^2 = .14$ ). As Hypothesis 4 predicted, employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership was negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' passive management-by-exception leadership ( $\beta = -.23, p < .01$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .05. Finally, as predicted in Hypothesis 5, employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership was negatively related to employees' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' laissez faire leadership ( $\beta = -.40, p < .01$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .16.

**TABLE 2**  
**MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND INTERCORRELATIONS**  
**AMONG STUDY VARIABLES**

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
<i>Demographic Variables:</i>														
1. Age	45.00	2.26	---	-.08	.05	-.19**	.31**	.47**	.13	-.02	.05	.03	.00	.07
2. Education	2.99	1.43		---	-.05	.30**	-.10	-.17*	-.17*	.11	-.26**	-.20**	.17*	.17*
3. Ethnicity	2.10	1.28			---	-.05	.12	.14	-.17*	-.21**	.14*	.00	-.13	-.20**
4. Gender	0.21	0.41				---	-.09	-.15*	-.12	.08	-.12	-.07	.19**	.13
5. Job tenure	5.19	5.64					---	.55**	-.10	-.20**	.20**	.13	-.21**	-.19**
6. Organizational tenure	10.48	8.71						---	-.07	-.12	.11	.10	-.07	-.09
<i>Ratings of Leadership:</i>														
7. Active management-by-exception	9.31	3.78							(.74)	.50**	-.01	.18*	.38**	.54**
8. Contingent reward leadership	6.37	3.86								(.83)	-.35**	-.13	.80**	.91**
9. Laissez faire leadership	52.74	18.70									(.83)	.56**	-.40**	-.37**
10. Passive management-by-exception	4.46	4.36										(.70)	-.23**	-.14*
11. Servant leadership	144.36	32.37											(.86)	.86**
12. Transformational leadership	10.42	4.00												(.93)

*Note.* N=207. Alpha coefficients are in parentheses along the diagonal.

\**p* < .05.

\*\**p* < .01.

**TABLE 3**  
**REGRESSION RESULTS FOR SUPERVISOR TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP, CONTINGENT REWARD LEADERSHIP, ACTIVE MANAGEMENT-BY-EXCEPTION LEADERSHIP, PASSIVE MANAGEMENT-BY-EXCEPTION LEADERSHIP, AND LAISSEZ FAIRE LEADERSHIP ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Supervisor transformational leadership	66.24	3.50	.86**
Supervisor contingent reward leadership	76.55	3.76	.80**
Supervisor active management-by-exception leadership	114.29	5.57	.38**
Supervisor passive management-by-exception leadership	156.39	4.25	-.23**
Supervisor laissez faire leadership	157.77	2.96	-.40**

*Note.* *N* = 207.

\*\**p* < .01.

## DISCUSSION

The present research endeavored to provide empirical support for servant leadership theory by studying its relationship with the well-supported leadership theories of transformational leadership and transactional leadership.

As predicted, perceived servant leadership was positively related to perceived transformational leadership. In other words, supervisors perceived as servant leaders were likely also to be perceived as transformational leaders. Chin and Smith (2006) argue that the characteristics of transformational leadership resemble many of the characteristics of servant leadership. Their study suggests that while servant leaders are transformational leaders, the reverse may not be true. “Servant leaders and transformational leaders share a common goal to transform their followers and organizations, albeit with different motivations, strategies and personal values” (p. 19).

Literature on servant leadership often grounds the theory originally in the context of spirituality at work (Autrey, 2001; Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; Blanchard, Hybels, & Hodges, 1999; Greenleaf, 1977; Sauser, 2005), but as the theory has entered the mainstream literature on leadership (e.g., Bass, 2000; Kouzes & Posner, 2007) it has become apparent that the methods employed by servant leaders overlap considerably—if not completely—with those used by transformational leaders (Stone et al., 2003). In fact, as this study has confirmed, operationally the two theories appear to be identical. Even at the questionnaire item level, transformational leadership and servant leadership are operationalized using virtually identical descriptors.

As also expected, perceived servant leadership was negatively related to perceived passive management-by-exception and laissez faire leadership. Supervisors reported as demonstrating servant leadership were not likely to be reported as demonstrating behaviors characteristic of passive management-by-exception or laissez faire leadership styles. For leaders never to intervene in employee work or to intervene in employee work only when corrective action is necessary involves respective use

of either inactivity in leadership or discipline, punishment, and negative feedback (Bass & Avolio, 1993)—tactics that oppose the empowerment tactics embraced in servant leadership.

Surprisingly, perceived servant leadership was positively related to perceived contingent reward leadership and perceived active management-by-exception leadership. That is, supervisors perceived to practice servant leadership were likely also to be perceived to practice both transactional contingent reward leadership and transactional active management-by-exception leadership. These findings were somewhat unexpected, given transactional leadership theory's primary emphasis on the fulfillment of leaders' personal needs by requiring followers to demonstrate behaviors compliant with the leaders' expectations (Kanungo, 2001). However, according to Conger and Kanungo (1998), transactional leaders operate according to a vision that *may or may not* represent the shared perspective advocated by servant leaders. Thus, there may be the possibility that transactional leaders share some decision-making with followers such that followers' interests are considered in the development of the transactional leaders' exchange of rewards for compliance. As a result, transactional contingent reward leadership may resemble servant leadership when transactional leaders create work expectations agreed upon by followers. Contingent reward behavior may then be used to set up transactions with employees in order to achieve both work goals (Bass, 1985) and personal employee goals.

Likewise, perceived transactional active management-by-exception may also appear akin to servant leadership in some respects. Although an active management-by-exception leader monitors a follower's performance in order to anticipate deviations from standards prior to their becoming problems (Hater & Bass, 1988), active management-by-exception leadership may appear as a form of servant leadership when the imposed standards are embraced by both the transactional leader and his/her follower. Such a rationale may help to explain why perceived servant leadership was found to be positively related to perceived transactional active management-by-exception leadership in the present study.

## LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the current study include a demographically and organizationally limited sample. While respondents represented five different organizations, the vast majority came from one organization. The sample was predominantly male (79%). Given that a significant positive correlation was found between gender and servant leadership ( $r = .19$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (i.e., female participants were more likely to report their leaders as servant leaders), the current study should be replicated in samples with more even distributions of gender.

## CONCLUSION

The present research represents an attempt to further develop servant leadership theory by empirically comparing and contrasting it with theories of transformational and transactional leadership. Such comparisons and contrasts are needed in the academic literature, as implied by Bass and Avolio (1993), who stated "we have only scratched the surface in terms of connecting...transformational leadership to other models" (p. 75). Bass (2000) concluded servant leadership's profound conceptual foundation offers great opportunity for further theoretical development, as was endeavored in the current study.

The results of the present study continue to suggest that servant leadership shares much in common with other theories of leadership, especially transformational leadership. In fact, the question posed by Stone et al. (2003) remains to be answered:

*[W]hat is the real difference, if any, between transformational leadership and servant leadership? Is servant leadership just a subset of transformational leadership or vice versa? Are transformational leadership and servant leadership the same theory, except for their use of different names? (Stone et al., 2003, p. 353)*

We encourage future researchers to continue efforts to answer this question. Are there any aspects of servant leadership which differentiate it from other possible forms of transformational leadership? Can subtle individual differences in leader focus (Stone et al., 2003) or leader motives (Chin & Smith, 2006)—the ‘desire to serve’ that spiritual proponents of servant leadership (e.g., Autry, 2001, p. 8; Blanchard & Hodges, 2003, p. 17; Blanchard et al., 1999, p. 78; Greenleaf, 1977, p. 21; Sauser, 2005, p. 356) often term as ‘the heart of a servant’—be teased out using measures that focus on leader behavior like those in the present study? If such theoretical differences are too subtle to be found using the state of the art measures of servant leadership and transformational leadership employed in this study, then perhaps servant leadership and transformational leadership are indeed simply two names for the same powerful theory of leadership. If so, then we are witnessing the convergence of two important streams of theory and research in leadership.

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