

# The effect of servant leadership, perceived organizational support, job satisfaction and job embeddedness on turnover intentions

## An empirical investigation

Servant  
leadership and  
work outcomes

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to provide insights into the effect of servant leadership on turnover intentions. The authors investigate the mediating effects of perceived organizational support (POS), job embeddedness and job satisfaction on the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions. In doing so, the authors seek to make the following contributions. First, the authors seek to provide additional empirical evidence for servant leadership as an effective organizational theory. Additionally, the authors seek to establish POS, embeddedness and job satisfaction as underlying mechanisms that transmit the positive effects of servant leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The data were collected from a paper and pencil survey questionnaire provided to employees of different organizations in a metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. The sample consisted of 150 participants; complete (listwise) data were available for 115 participants.

**Findings** – The study shows that POS and embeddedness are mediating mechanisms through which servant leadership is related to employee turnover intentions. The authors found POS and job embeddedness to be significant mediating constructs which help explain the nature of the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions.

**Originality/value** – By investigating these constructs in the present framework, we help to provide answers to the questions of how and why servant leadership affects employee outcomes. These answers are an important step towards more fully understanding the complex ways by which followers respond to servant leadership.

**Keywords** Servant leadership, Turnover intentions, Perceived organizational support, Embeddedness, Job satisfaction

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Servant leadership is based on the premise that leaders subordinate their own interests and, presumably, those of the organization, for the interests of their followers (Laub, 2004). Servant leadership as it is known today is credited to the early writings of Robert Greenleaf (1970) who stated that a leader must first aspire to serve before making a conscious choice to aspire to lead. Greenleaf was concerned with making the world a better place, calling on organizations to serve the needs of its members, as well as the least privileged in society,



which he deemed to be the best test of servant leadership (Keith, 2012). To be sure, the definition of servant leadership according to Greenleaf (1970) is:

The servant leader is servant first. . . it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve to serve first. Then conscious choice brings out to aspire to lead. . . The best test, and difficult to administer is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous and more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed? (1970).

Greenleaf's writings primarily answer the questions of *what* servant leadership is and to some extent *who* servant leaders are; this is consistent with the goal of descriptive researchers and serves as a building block of theoretical development (Bacharach, 1989). Lacking from Greenleaf's writings are answers to questions of *how*, *when*, *where* and *why* servant leadership impacts workplace outcomes. The proliferation of servant leadership definitions and measurement instruments (e.g. Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Laub, 2004; Page and Wong, 2000) has likely contributed to these theoretical gaps. In attempts to rectify these varying perspectives, Van Dierendonck (2011) synthesized the competing frameworks and developed methodologically sound measurement instruments (Latham, 2014). Nevertheless, critics continue to claim that servant leadership lacks a theoretical foundation and sufficient empirical support (e.g. Avolio *et al.*, 2009). While business practitioners tout servant leadership's beneficial effects (Covey, 1998; Hunter, 1998), early claims about servant leadership's positive effects were largely anecdotal (Northouse, 1997). Therefore, the need to more fully understand how servant leadership is transmitted into important outcomes remains.

Accordingly, we expand upon Hunter *et al.* (2013) by examining previously unexplored mediating mechanisms of servant leadership's positive effects. Specifically, Hunter *et al.* (2013) examined antecedents of servant leadership (i.e. leader personality) and outcomes of servant leadership (i.e. turnover intentions; engagement). However, while servant leadership has a demonstrated effect on workplace attitudes and attachments (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Hu and Liden, 2011; Neubert *et al.*, 2008; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010) and attitudes and workplace attachments have a demonstrated effect on turnover intentions (Allen and Griffeth, 2001; Maertz and Griffeth, 2004), less research has been done to examine the mechanism through which servant leadership influences workplace outcomes. Nonetheless, given its established association with reduced productivity and disengagement (Argote *et al.*, 1995; Christian and Ellis, 2014; Van der Vegt *et al.*, 2009), turnover runs counter to organizations' pursuits of short- and long-term performance.

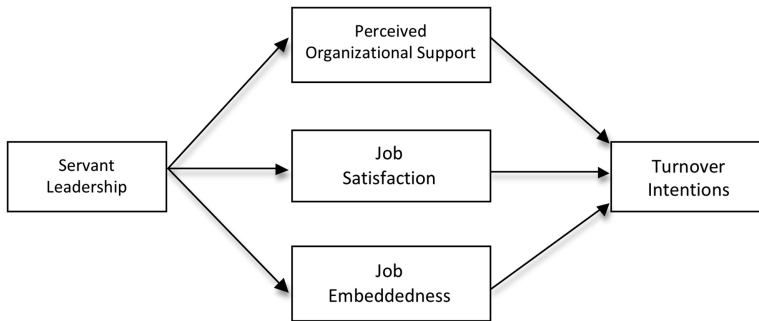
Therefore, we investigate the mediating effects of perceived organizational support (POS), job embeddedness and job satisfaction on the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions. In doing so, we seek to make the following contributions. First, we seek to provide a theoretical foundation for the effects of servant leadership and offer additional empirical evidence for servant leadership theory. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we seek to establish POS, embeddedness, and job satisfaction as underlying mechanisms that transmit the positive effects of servant leadership to employees' turnover intentions. Together, POSs, embeddedness, and satisfaction may provide important explanations to the theoretical questions of *how*, *when* and *why* servant leadership leads to auspicious outcomes. In what follows, we develop hypotheses and empirically examine the transmitting effects of POS, job embeddedness, and job satisfaction on the servant leadership – turnover intentions relationship (Figure 1).

## Theory and hypothesis development

### *Servant leadership*

Servant leadership emphasizes motivation to serve others and the denial of self-interest (Liden *et al.*, 2014). Servant leaders accept their responsibility to a wider range of

Figure 1. Hypothesized research model



organizational stakeholders and encourage subordinates to embrace moral reasoning (Graham, 1991). In addition, the moral component of servant leadership emphasizes serving the needs of followers as an end as opposed to a means; accordingly, servant leaders seek power so that it can be used in the service of others (Mayer *et al.*, 2008; Spears, 2004).

At the individual-level of analysis, researchers have found that servant leadership positively influences employees' psychological well-being (Rieke *et al.*, 2008), affective commitment (Zhou and Miao, 2014), and service performance (Cheng *et al.*, 2010). At the team-level of analysis, servant leadership has demonstrated positive effects on team commitment (Dammhauser and Boshoff, 2006), procedural justice climate (Ehrhart, 2004), and team performance (Politis, 2013). Finally, studies at the organizational-level of analysis have positively linked servant leadership with organizational citizenship behaviors (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010), and increased return on assets (Peterson *et al.*, 2012). Collectively, these studies have helped establish servant leadership theory alongside the existing theories.

*Servant leadership and perceived organizational support (POS)*

POS encompasses employee perceptions concerning the extent to which an organization cares about their well-being and values their contributions (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001). Organizational leaders (e.g. supervisors) are often endorsed as the primary sources of POS because they are responsible for the decisions that shape the policies and procedures influencing the direction of the company and its treatment of personnel (e.g. training, rewards) (Hayton *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, employees who perceive a high level of organizational support will feel compelled to reciprocate in kind with behaviors that benefit the organization and have a greater sense that they are valued and respected by the organization (Zhang and Jia, 2010).

Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) identified eight dimensions of servant leadership: empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, interpersonal acceptance and stewardship. Empowerment involves the sharing of power from leader to subordinates, giving the latter greater feelings of efficacy and motivation to improve performance (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Standing back involves the extent to which a leader prioritizes subordinate needs and gives them the necessary support and credit for a job well done. Humility involves leaders recognizing their strengths and weaknesses and therefore seeking the assistance of others, and stewardship is "closely related to social responsibility, loyalty, and teamwork" (Van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011, p. 252). Followers reciprocate their leaders' humble service with their continued attachment to the organization (Graham, 1991; Blau, 1964). Furthermore, since servant leaders authentically do these things out of who they are and not out of some organizational requirement, the effects

on POS should be more impactful (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Thus, we put forth the following hypothesis:

*H1.* There is a positive relationship between servant leadership and perceived organizational support.

#### *Servant leadership and job embeddedness*

Job embeddedness refers to the contextual and perceptual forces constraining people to their jobs, location, and colleagues (Yao *et al.*, 2004). Mitchell *et al.* (2001) refer to job embeddedness as a social web exerting three primary influences on employee retention. Specifically, they called these influences: (1) *links*- formal or informal connections to fellow employees, (2) *fit*- extent to which an individual's job and community match with other aspects of their life, and (3) *sacrifice*- the perceived cost of physical or psychological benefits surrendered by leaving a job. The primary focus of job embeddedness is on factors that keep people in their jobs (Holtom and O'Neill, 2004).

Individuals can form many associations in and out of the workplace. Individuals at work can form *links* with supervisors, coworkers, suppliers and customers; within the community links can be formed with neighbors, members of social and religious groups, or places of business frequently visited. The greater numbers of links cultivated by an individual will yield higher personal costs of leaving (e.g. financial, emotional, psychological) (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, individuals will feel a greater sense of *fit* with both the organization and community when their knowledge, skills and abilities match those of the present job, when opportunities for professional development and future opportunities are abundant, and/or when a person's values are a good match with those of the community in which they reside (Holtom and O'Neill, 2004). Finally, *sacrifices* may take the form of any material (e.g. cost-of-living differences) or psychological (e.g. perceptions of job stability) benefits that one would lose by leaving their present job (Mallol *et al.*, 2007).

Greenleaf's ultimate test of servant leadership addressed the question of whether subordinates grew personally and professionally and whether they themselves advanced to serve others (Greenleaf, 1970). This focus on the individual's development is consistent with fit aspects of embeddedness. Similarly, the concentration on employee development should overlap with the links dimension of embeddedness as formal and informal connections with leaders and peers should increase an individual's sense of attachment. Collectively, we contend that working with servant leaders, both formally and informally, would be of high value to employees and a large sacrifice if lost. Thus, the following hypothesis is put forth:

*H2.* There is a positive relationship between servant leadership and job embeddedness.

#### *Servant leadership and job satisfaction*

Job satisfaction is an attitude with cognitive and affective components (Fisher, 2000). Servant leadership is positively associated with job satisfaction across numerous contexts (e.g. Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Chung *et al.*, 2010; Shaw and Newton, 2014). We contend that employees develop positive attitudes because servant leaders prioritize their follower's legitimate needs above their own and demonstrate their commitment to follower development, inclusion in decision-making and the building of community (Greenleaf, 1998; Keith, 2012; Laub, 2004).

Empowerment and employee development are essential tenets of servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011). The notion of empowerment is derived from theories of participative management, which advocate for the sharing of managerial power (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997). The willingness to relinquish power with subordinates requires trust, which is found in

high-quality servant leader–member relationships characterized by frequent interactions, open communications and a constant exchange of ideas (Barbuto and Hayden, 2010; Sendjaya and Pekerti, 2010).

Empowered employees perceive a greater degree of control over their work and have a heightened sense of task autonomy, which is associated with high levels of job satisfaction (Spector, 1986; Ugboro and Obeng, 2000). Since servant leaders promote an environment that values employee development, embrace a participative style of decision-making, and share their power and status for the common good of the individual and organization (Laub, 2004), we expect servant leadership to have a positive effect on job satisfaction.

*H3.* There is a positive relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction.

#### *Mediators of the servant leadership–turnover intentions relationship*

Employee turnover can be extremely costly to organizations (e.g. replacement expenditures, decreased morale; O’Connell and Mei-Chuan, 2007). Leadership is considered a distal predictor of turnover (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000). In support, supportive and considerate leadership behaviors such as those typically exerted by servant leaders are often associated with decreased turnover intentions (Fleishman and Harris, 1998; Jaramillo *et al.*, 2009). Thus, employees who perceive high levels of organizational support are more likely to feel valued, judge their jobs more favorably, increase their commitment to organizational goals, and lessen the likelihood of quitting (Allen and John, 1990; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). As such, we put forth the following hypothesis:

*H4.* Perceived organizational support mediates the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions

Servant leaders’ efforts to develop a sense of belonging, build community, establish deep ties, and deepen social capital positively influence employee retention, attendance and citizenship (Lee *et al.*, 2004). Thus, becoming more socially integrated or “linked” into the social structure should diminish turnover intentions (O’Reilly *et al.*, 1989; Sykes, 2015). When these links are valued, voluntarily leaving the job becomes a greater sacrifice and these higher sacrifice perceptions make it more difficult to leave (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001; Shaw *et al.*, 1998). Thus, highly embedded individuals engage in fewer employment search behaviors (Crossley *et al.*, 2007). Contrastingly, individuals with fewer links have much less to lose by quitting (Felps *et al.*, 2009). As such, the following hypothesis is put forth:

*H5.* Job embeddedness mediates the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions.

Practicing managers among Fortune’s top-ranked businesses contend that employees of servant leaders feel a greater sense of job satisfaction (Glashagel, 2009; Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002), while one qualitative study of industry executives reports higher levels of performance and satisfaction (Jones, 2012). Although these studies suggest a direct relation between servant leadership and job satisfaction, additional empirical evidence, particularly among for-profit organizations, is lacking. Given the influence of peers and supervisors on individuals’ emotions and workplace attitudes (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), we contend that job satisfaction will mediate the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions. In support, Pucic maintains that satisfaction among followers is attained through the reciprocal exchange of leader consideration and follower compliance (Pucic, 2014). Individuals who form a large number of positive relationships with their peers and supervisors become more socially integrated and these social structures positively influence job satisfaction (O’Reilly *et al.*, 1989; Sykes, 2015). Undoubtedly, servant leaders, those individuals who by definition subordinate their well-being for the well-being of their

followers, meet these criteria. Therefore, one should expect an individual experiencing positive relationships at work to experience high job satisfaction (Fisher, 2000), which in turn should be negatively related to turnover intentions. In support, a great number of studies offer evidence that job satisfaction is negatively associated with voluntary turnover (Helm, 2013). Employees who are highly satisfied often remain with the organization; however, those who are dissatisfied increase their employment search alternatives (Kessler, 2014). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H6. Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

Participants were recruited by graduate students enrolled in master's degree-level courses at a public institution in the southeastern United States. We employed this study design in efforts to increase the generalizability of our findings; specifically, utilizing such a diversified sample of participants reduces the risk of source bias and positively influences the external validity of our findings (Stone-Romero and Rosopa, 2008). Moreover, Wheeler *et al.* (2013) found that student-recruited samples were not substantially demographically different from nonstudent-recruited samples and concluded that it was appropriate to draw statistical conclusions from the student-recruited data. To be sure, their meta-analysis found that researchers would arrive at similar valid conclusions with student-recruited sample data as they would otherwise. Hence, we felt that our method of collecting the data was appropriate.

Following the recommendation of Wheeler *et al.* (2013), we instructed the graduate student recruiters to identify individuals who were currently employed in a full-time capacity (i.e. working 40 or more hours per week). Potential participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and were made aware of the study's general purpose (i.e. to examine workplace attitudes and behaviors). Participants were asked to respond to a paper and pencil survey that was accompanied by a cover letter and consent form. The cover letter explained the study, reiterated that participation was voluntary, and ensured that all information would be treated with the outmost concern for confidentiality. Participants were given the opportunity to complete the survey at their convenience. Additionally, they were offered the opportunity to mail their completed surveys back to the researcher or return their surveys in a sealed envelope to the graduate student recruiter. After reviewing the cover letter and informed consent documents, participants were presented with the survey instrument, which contained the measurement scales as well as demographic questions on. We find that this sample represents a suitable cross section of the general working population which is supported by the demographic data.

In total, we received survey responses from 150 participants [1]. The sample was predominantly male (65%). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 67 years old ( $M = 38.80$ ,  $SD = 11.68$ ), and were predominantly Caucasian (white, non-Hispanic; 65.3%) or African-American (22%). The majority of participants reported having at least some level of college education (i.e. 11% indicated they had associate degrees, 43% stated they held a bachelor's degree, and 19% stated that they had master's degrees). The average work experience of the sample was just over 15 years ( $M = 15.05$ ,  $SD = 11.42$ ), thereby further confirming the appropriateness of this sample and its representativeness. Participants worked primarily in the local offices or headquarters of large multinational, national and regional Fortune 500 companies mostly in the insurance, banking and financial services sectors. The demographic composition of the sample seems to represent a suitable cross-section of the general working

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population, thereby providing support for the generalizability of the sample to an average “working” population.

### *Measures*

*Servant leadership.* The multidimensional measure developed and validated by Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) consists of 30 items representing 8 dimensions of servant leadership, namely empowerment (e.g. My manager helps me to further develop myself.), standing back (e.g. My manager keeps himself/herself in the background and gives credit to others.), accountability (e.g. My manager holds me responsible for the work I carry out.), forgiveness (e.g. My manager keeps criticizing people for the mistakes they have made in their work. Reverse-worded), courage (e.g. My manager takes risks and does what needs to be done in his/her view.), authenticity (e.g. My manager is open about his/her limitations and weaknesses.), humility (e.g. My manager admits his/her mistakes to his/her supervisor.) and stewardship (e.g. My manager always emphasizes the importance of focusing on the good of the whole.). Respondents were asked to evaluate their immediate supervisor on each of the items using an 8-point Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (Never True) to 8 (Always True). The overarching composite scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

*Perceived organizational support.* POS was measured with Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986 8-item measure. A sample item was “The organization values my contribution to its well-being.” The reliability of the scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

*Embeddedness.* Embeddedness was measured with the 7-item global embeddedness measure by Crossley and colleagues (Crossley *et al.*, 2007). A sample item included “It would be very difficult for me to leave this organization”. The scale employed a 5-point Likert-style agreement scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

*Job satisfaction.* Job satisfaction was measured with the 3-item scale by Hoppock (1935). Respondents rated each of the items on a 5-point Likert-style agreement scale ranging from (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). “All in all, I am satisfied with my job” represents a sample item. The estimated reliability of the scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

*Turnover intentions.* Individuals were asked to indicate their intentions to quit using a 3-item scale adapted from Hom and Griffeth (1991). “I intend to leave this company in the near future” represents a sample item. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (definitely not) to 5 (definitely yes). The reliability of the scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

*Control variables.* In order to ensure a rigorous test of the study hypotheses, we also controlled for two demographic characteristics of respondents, namely age (in years) and gender (male = 0; female = 1). We felt the inclusion of these variables was warranted given that recent meta-analytic research found evidence of a moderating effect of gender on the embeddedness – turnover intentions relationship (Jiang *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, while the magnitudes of the associations tend to be quite small, past meta-analytic research suggests that age and gender significantly correlate with turnover intentions (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986), as well as POS (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Moreover, while the form of the relationship is widely debated and inherently complex, there does seem to be some evidence that age is related to job satisfaction (Bedeian *et al.*, 1992). Taken together, controlling for these demographic variables seems prudent.

### *Analytic strategy*

All hypotheses were evaluated using the PROCESS utilities developed by Hayes (2013); as recommended, all coefficients and confidence intervals were derived utilizing unstandardized variables and 5,000 bootstrapped samples. Since the bootstrapping procedure requires

complete data, all analyses pertaining to the evaluation of the theoretical research model are based on a listwise *N* of 115. Based on our hypothetical model (Figure 1), we tested a mediation model with three parallel mediators, namely POS, embeddedness and satisfaction which corresponds to Model 4 within the PROCESS framework.

**Results**

The means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations among all study variables and control variables can be found in Table I. Correlational evidence revealed that servant leadership was significantly positively correlated with POS ( $r = 0.50, p < 0.01$ ), embeddedness ( $r = 0.47, p < 0.01$ ), and job satisfaction ( $r = 0.51, p < 0.01$ ) and significantly negatively correlated with turnover intentions ( $r = -0.39, p < 0.01$ ). Embeddedness was positively correlated with POS ( $r = 0.35, p < 0.01$ ) and job satisfaction ( $r = 0.51, p < 0.01$ ) and negatively correlated with turnover intentions ( $r = -0.52, p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, POS was positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $r = 0.40, p < 0.01$ ) and negatively correlated with turnover intentions ( $r = -0.48, p < 0.01$ ), while job satisfaction and turnover intentions were negatively correlated ( $r = -0.44, p < 0.01$ ) (see Table II).

*Test of hypotheses*

Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 stated that there would be a positive relationship between servant leadership and POS (H1), job embeddedness (H2) and job satisfaction (H3). The results of PROCESS analyses (Model 4; Hayes, 2013) revealed that servant leadership was a significant predictor of POS ( $B = 0.41, SE = 0.07, p < 0.01$ ), embeddedness ( $B = 0.37, SE = 0.07, p < 0.01$ ), and job satisfaction ( $B = 0.23, SE = 0.04, p < 0.01$ ), thereby providing support for Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3, respectively.

Next, we hypothesized that the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions would be mediated by POS (H4), embeddedness (H5) and job satisfaction (H6). In order to assess these mediational hypotheses, we estimated the magnitude and significance of the indirect effect ( $a \times b$ ) within PROCESS using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples to derive the 90 and 95% lower and upper bound confidence intervals. Evidence of mediation (i.e. an indirect effect of *X* on *Y* through *M*) exists when the indirect effect (i.e.  $a \times b$ ) is significantly different from zero. Moreover, according to Hayes (2013) a direct effect of *X* on *Y* (commonly referred to as “*c*”) is not needed to establish mediation (Hayes, 2013). The estimated total, direct and indirect effects can be found in Table III.

Notably, the direct effect of servant leadership on turnover intentions was not significant ( $B = -0.10, SE = 0.10, p = 0.33$ ). Thus, we examined the significance of the indirect effect ( $a \times b$ ) to determine whether the effects of servant leadership on turnover intentions were mediated by the three hypothesized parallel mediators, namely POS, embeddedness and satisfaction. As mentioned previously, servant leadership was a significant predictor of POS

| Variable                  | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1     | 2       | 3       | 4       | 5      | 6       | 7      | 8 |
|---------------------------|----------|-----------|-------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---|
| 1. Gender                 | 0.33     | 0.47      | –     |         |         |         |        |         |        |   |
| 2. Age                    | 38.80    | 11.68     | 0.15  | –       |         |         |        |         |        |   |
| 3. Servant leadership     | 5.87     | 1.10      | -0.06 | -0.06   | (0.94)  |         |        |         |        |   |
| 4. Perceived org. support | 3.71     | 0.92      | 0.06  | -0.01   | 0.50**  | (0.91)  |        |         |        |   |
| 5. Embeddedness           | 3.39     | 0.97      | -0.12 | 0.11    | 0.47**  | 0.35**  | (0.91) |         |        |   |
| 6. Job satisfaction       | 3.33     | 0.54      | -0.04 | 0.08    | 0.51**  | 0.40**  | 0.51** | (0.80)  |        |   |
| 7. Turnover intentions    | 2.34     | 1.24      | 0.01  | -0.26** | -0.39** | -0.48** | -0.52  | -0.44** | (0.94) |   |

**Note(s):** Pairwise *N* = 127–147. Gender was dummy coded (male = 0, female = 1). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients appear in parentheses; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table I.**  
Means, standard deviations and correlations



| Variable                         | Perceived org. support |           |                               | Embeddedness        |           |                              | Job satisfaction    |           |                               | Turnover intentions  |                               |           |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------|
|                                  | B                      | 95% lower | 95% upper                     | B                   | 95% lower | 95% upper                    | B                   | 95% lower | 95% upper                     | B                    | 95% lower                     | 95% upper |
| Intercept                        | 0.96                   | -0.03     | 1.94                          | 0.96                | -0.09     | 2.01                         | 1.78 <sup>***</sup> | 1.22      | 2.33                          | 7.97 <sup>***</sup>  | 6.69                          | 9.24      |
| Gender                           | 0.23                   | -0.09     | 0.55                          | -0.27               | -0.62     | 0.07                         | -0.06               | -0.24     | 0.12                          | -0.05                | -0.41                         | 0.31      |
| Age                              | 0.01                   | -0.01     | 0.02                          | 0.01                | -0.00     | 0.02                         | 0.01                | -0.00     | 0.01                          | -0.03                | -0.05                         | -0.02     |
| Servant leadership               | 0.42 <sup>**</sup>     | 0.28      | 0.56                          | 0.37 <sup>***</sup> | 0.22      | 0.52                         | 0.23 <sup>***</sup> | 0.15      | 0.31                          | -0.10                | -0.29                         | 0.10      |
| Perceived organizational support | -                      | -         | -                             | -                   | -         | -                            | -                   | -         | -                             | -0.34 <sup>***</sup> | -0.55                         | -0.12     |
| Embeddedness                     | -                      | -         | -                             | -                   | -         | -                            | -                   | -         | -                             | -0.42 <sup>**</sup>  | -0.63                         | -0.21     |
| Job satisfaction                 | -                      | -         | -                             | -                   | -         | -                            | -                   | -         | -                             | -0.35                | -0.75                         | 0.04      |
| R <sup>2</sup>                   |                        |           | 0.26 <sup>***</sup>           |                     |           | 0.21 <sup>***</sup>          |                     |           | 0.25 <sup>***</sup>           |                      | 0.50 <sup>***</sup>           |           |
| F <sub>(df1, df2)</sub>          |                        |           | F <sub>(3, 111)</sub> = 12.69 |                     |           | F <sub>(3, 111)</sub> = 9.87 |                     |           | F <sub>(3, 111)</sub> = 12.53 |                      | F <sub>(6, 108)</sub> = 18.13 |           |

**Note(s):** Listwise N = 115. Gender was dummy coded (male = 0, female = 1). Unstandardized variables were used for all PROCESS analyses. Bootstrap sample size = 10,000; <sup>\*\*</sup>The 95% bootstrapped confidence interval does not include zero; *p* < 0.01

**Table II.**  
Results of hypothesis testing using PROCESS model 4

( $B = 0.42, SE = 0.07, p < 0.01$ ); moreover, POS was significantly negatively related to turnover intentions ( $B = -0.34, SE = 0.11, p < 0.01$ ). Bootstrapped estimates revealed that the indirect effect of servant leadership on turnover intentions through POS was significantly different from zero ( $a \times b = -0.14, CI_{95\%} = [-0.28, -0.04]$ ). Therefore, support was found for the mediating effect of POS on the servant leadership – turnover intentions relationship (H4). Similarly, servant leadership significantly predicted embeddedness ( $B = 0.37, SE = 0.07, p < 0.01$ ) and embeddedness significantly predicted turnover intentions ( $B = -0.42, SE = 0.10, p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, the indirect effect of servant leadership on turnover intentions through embeddedness was significantly different from zero ( $a \times b = -0.15, CI_{95\%} = [-0.25, -0.07]$ ), thereby providing support for H5.

Lastly, while servant leadership was significantly related to job satisfaction ( $B = 0.23, SE = 0.04, p < 0.01$ ), job satisfaction was somewhat surprisingly not negatively related to turnover intentions at conventional levels of statistical significance ( $B = -0.35, SE = 0.20, p < 0.10$ ). Further, neither the 95% ( $a \times b = -0.08, CI_{95\%} = [-0.19, 0.02]$ ) or 90% confidence interval for the indirect effect of servant leadership on turnover intentions through job satisfaction ( $a \times b = -0.08, CI_{95\%} = [-0.17, 0.01]$ ) were significantly different from zero. Thus, we failed to find support for the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the servant leadership – turnover intentions relationship (H6).

However, the combined (i.e. total) effect of servant leadership on turnover intentions through all three mediators was significant ( $B = -0.38, SE = 0.08, p < 0.01$ ). In other words, servant leadership was negatively related to turnover intentions (i.e. increases in servant leadership were related to decreases in turnover intentions) when accounting for the mediating effects of POS, embeddedness and job satisfaction. Thus, the results indicated that servant leadership did not appear to have a direct relationship with turnover intentions; instead, the auspicious effects of servant leadership on turnover intentions were mediated by positive workplace attitudes. Finally, we wish to note that all hypotheses were tested with and without the inclusion of the two demographic control variables (i.e. age, gender). The inclusion or exclusion of control variables did not substantively impact our findings.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions via POS, embeddedness, and job satisfaction. While past studies have found a significant direct relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2006; Shaw and Newton, 2014), our results suggest that these relationships are mediated through the influence of POS and job embeddedness. As such, our study contributes to the existing literature on servant leadership, POS, job

|  | Estimate | 90% CI <sup>a</sup> | 95% CI <sup>a</sup> |
|--|----------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Direct effect</i>                                       |          |                     |                     |
| SL → turnover intentions                                   | -0.10    | [-0.26, 0.07]       | [-0.29, 0.10]       |
| <i>Indirect effects</i>                                    |          |                     |                     |
| SL → POS → turnover intentions                             | -0.14*   | [-0.25, -0.05]      | [-0.28, -0.04]      |
| SL → embeddedness → turnover intentions                    | -0.15*   | [-0.23, -0.08]      | [-0.25, -0.07]      |
| SL → satisfaction → turnover intentions                    | -0.08    | [-0.17, 0.01]       | [-0.20, 0.03]       |
| <i>Total effect</i>  |          |                     |                     |
| SL → POS, embeddedness, satisfaction → turnover intentions | -0.38*   | [-0.51, -0.25]      | [-0.55, -0.23]      |

**Table III.**

Estimated direct, indirect & total effects

**Note(s):** SL = Servant leadership; POS = Perceived organizational support; <sup>a</sup>Confidence interval values estimated using unstandardized regression coefficients and 5,000 bootstrapped samples; \*  $p < 0.05$

embeddedness, and turnover intentions. Of particular importance to servant leadership, our study provides meaningful answers to the questions of how and why (e.g. how and why servant leadership works) that are necessary for good theory (Whetten, 1989). Our findings indicate that POS and job embeddedness are underlying mechanisms that account for servant leadership's effects on turnover intentions within the organization. These findings are consistent with theory and expectations as servant leaders place an emphasis on employee development, listening empathetically, empowering others, and meeting the needs of their subordinates (Keith, 2012; Liden *et al.*, 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2011), which are all behaviors that demonstrate a sense of support and foster deep reciprocal relationships between leader and follower (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001; Zhang and Jia, 2010).

Nonetheless, we did not find job satisfaction to mediate the relationship between servant leadership and turnover intentions, likely due to the (somewhat surprising) insignificant relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Thus, perhaps satisfaction is better conceptualized as a direct outcome (result) of servant leadership rather than the means to an end (i.e. retention vs turnover). Alternatively, one explanation for this finding may stem from the time period during which data were collected. Data were collected during a period of nationwide economic instability and low job mobility. Hence, simply being dissatisfied with one's job may not have been impetus enough to want to turnover given the economic ramifications of doing so; this might also explain why job embeddedness did transmit the positive effects of servant leadership.

### Practical implications

There are a number of practical implications that can be derived from these findings. Many organizations view employee retention as a strategic opportunity for maintaining a competitive advantage (De Long and Davenport, 2003). Additionally, turnover is extremely costly for organizations in terms of: (1) lost human and social capital (Wang and Lantzy, 2011), (2) increased organizational expenditures (Davidson *et al.*, 2010), and (3) decreased employee performance (Shaw *et al.*, 2005), which can lead to (4) contagion effects influencing other employee's turnover intentions (Felps *et al.*, 2009). Hence, reducing employee turnover is a primary concern and major organizational challenge given that employees may leave for a variety of reasons (e.g. feeling devalued by the organization, lack of communication, poor leadership, job ambiguity, lack of upward mobility, feeling excluded and personal life choices) (Frank *et al.*, 2004; Holmes *et al.*, 2013; Oladapo, 2014).

Organizations have often focused on increasing employee's affective organizational commitment as a means to reduce turnover; our results also suggest that nonaffective and off-the-job factors influence individual's turnover intentions (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Since individuals generally exert a degree of cognitive contemplation before quitting a job and often remain as a result of maintaining status quo (Crossley *et al.*, 2007), organizations may benefit from identifying ways to increase employee links to the organization, its members and the community. For example, providing more opportunities to work in teams can enhance the number of personal links among employees and foster the development of deeper ties as peers successfully complete team-based projects. Additionally, organizations may want to encourage and support community service projects by employees and promote employee involvement in local schools and/or civic organizations given that these efforts have been associated with increased embeddedness in the community (Holtom *et al.*, 2006).

Managers may also want to increase sacrifice issues by increasing the number of perks offered on the job (e.g. on-site daycare facilities, job autonomy, stock options and defined benefit pensions). Severing employment with the organization becomes increasingly difficult when an employee perceives he or she will sacrifice many valued psychological and/or

material benefits (Mallol *et al.*, 2007). Training and mentoring programs are further examples of valued perks firms may want to offer because employees consider training and mentoring programs essential to develop their talent and social ties within the organization (Holmes *et al.*, 2013). Finally, Mitchell *et al.* (2001) contend that leadership can be an important link to embed employees. Servant leaders emphasize creating value for the community, employee development, high-quality dyadic relationships with and between employees, and serving others; this creates a climate in which followers want to stay (Hunter *et al.*, 2013; Laub, 2004; Liden *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, organizations may want to encourage leaders to adopt a servant leadership style of influence as doing so may be a very effective way of increasing employee links to the organization (Holtom *et al.*, 2006).

It is well known that employees view the actions of organizational agents as actions of the organization itself (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Hence, there is an opportunity to provide leaders with servant leadership training as a means to enhance employee perceptions of organizational support, job satisfaction, and job embeddedness. By helping leaders understand the importance of building community, empowering subordinates, and prioritizing subordinate needs, organizations can directly impact positive perceptions of organizational support, job satisfaction, and embeddedness while indirectly reducing turnover intentions among employees.

### Future research

Accordingly, future research may want to consider the effects of contextual pressures (e.g. economy) on the mediating effects of job embeddedness and POS on the servant leadership – work outcomes relationships. For example, servant leaders may be able to reduce felt uncertainty commonly associated with economic instability (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002) given their stated prioritization of followers' needs. Accordingly, servant leaders may be better suited for supporting and retaining followers during periods of economic turmoil.

Furthermore, we hope that future research will further attempt to disentangle the relationships between servant leadership and important work outcomes such as employee turnover. We expect additional avenues for future research with regard to the mediating mechanisms between servant leadership and other relevant organizational outcomes such as deviant behaviors and self-defeating work behaviors. Also, increased research efforts may shed light on potential moderators in the established relationship as well as consider a psychological climate for servant leadership.

### Limitations

While we are encouraged by our results, this study is not without its limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow us to draw causal inferences. Moreover, the study design does not rule out alternative models (e.g. reverse relationships). Therefore, we relied on theory to substantiate our model specification. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design does not allow us to determine any time-related effects of servant leadership. This precluded us from drawing conclusions regarding the long-term effects of servant leadership and addressing situationally contingent behavioral changes of the servant leader. Second, all data were obtained from a single source, raising concerns of common variance bias. Nonetheless, an examination of the bivariate correlations (Table I) reveals that the strength of the relationships among study variables are consistent with past research, suggesting that common method variance does not appear to undermine the results.

Lastly, one might suggest that relying on a graduate student-recruited sample would restrict the generalizability of our findings. However, recent research found few differences between student-recruited samples and nonstudent-recruited samples in terms of both resulting sample characteristic and observed bivariate correlations (Wheeler *et al.*, 2013). In fact, given the effects

of organizational selection and employee self-selection (i.e. attraction-selection-attrition; Schneider, 1987), limiting data collection to one organization would have ostensibly resulted in a more homogenous sample. Moreover, our respondents did not have to fear any negative repercussions, which should have increased the likelihood of accurate responses.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our study provides needed empirical evidence supporting the assertion that servant leadership is a viable organizational theory (Parris and Peachey, 2013). Previous research on servant leadership's relationship to job satisfaction and turnover has been conducted in nonprofit or bureaucratic organizations (Chung *et al.*, 2010; Shaw and Newton, 2014). By testing our hypotheses with individuals employed in for-profit companies, we extend servant leadership theory's applicability in multiple contexts. Our results offer initial support for the notion that POS and embeddedness are underlying mechanisms through which servant leadership impacts auspicious workplace outcomes. Collectively, these constructs help provide answers to *how* and *why* servant leadership leads to favorable outcomes, and answers to these questions are an important step towards more fully understanding the complex ways by which followers respond to servant leadership. We hope this study generates continued interest into the mechanisms by which followers and organizations benefit from servant leadership behaviors.

## Note

1. Note that complete (listwise) data were only available for 115 participants.

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