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INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL IN BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS:
A THEORETICAL MODEL WITH A FOCUS ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS ANTECEDENT

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Abstract: In the past decades the topic of Organizational Social Capital (OSC) has raised great concern in both academic studies and managerial practices. Social capital at organizational level is usually understood as a multidimensional concept related to the set of potential intangible resources that are embedded within, available through, and derived from a network of agents' relations. Those resources facilitate business value creation having important implications for business professionals. Nevertheless, although so much academic and professional work has been dedicated to the concept of social capital, this effort has been mainly focused on the study of inter-organizational relations. Theoretical and empirical studies of antecedents and consequences of intra-organizational social capital have been scarce, which suggests that further research is needed in that matter. This paper explores the antecedents of intra-organizational social capital from a comprehensive perspective that integrates leadership as the main antecedent. To be precise, we propose that intra-organizational social capital

is a direct consequence of an organizational ethical and community context to which leadership in the servant dimension plays a transcendental role. Indeed, since the seminal work of Greenleaf (1977) the servant leadership concept has been widespread among business academics and professionals for the value it brings to the organization not only in ethical but also in excellence terms. Among the recent styles and theories on leadership up to date, servant leadership fits perfectly an organizational ethical context both at the organizational or group level, acting in addition as a main promoter of that context. Furthermore, servant leadership is linked to the cultivation of helpful, altruistic and servant attitudes among the employees which are useful elements in the generation of social capital inside the organization. A model then for understanding the causes of intra-organizational social capital with a focus on servant leadership is here elaborated from which conclusions and implications for Management will be delineated.

Keywords: *associability, business value, applied ethics, organizational ethical context, organizational social capital, servant leadership.*

INTRODUCTION

During recent years social capital has become increasingly popular across a range of social science disciplines. It has been considered as an *umbrella* concept for studying different aspects like youth behaviour problems, economic development, organizational dissolution rates, career success and the creation of intellectual capital among others (Adler & Kwon, 2002). This effusive utilization of the concept is derived from scientists interested both in the positive consequences of sociability and the analysis of how non-monetary forms of capital can be important sources of power and influence in organizations (Portes, 1998). In this sense, it is increasingly realized that social capital is more and more necessary to manage efficiently both explicit and tacit knowledge, which places all actors inside the firm as main contributors to the formation of internal social capital by means of their relationships and seek for a better access to information, resources, opportunities and control advantages (Burt, 1992).

Thus, the study of work relationships is not a new concept and nowadays organizations consider as a key asset the potential intangible resources that are embedded within, available through, and derived from a network of employee's relationships. Those resources facilitate business value creation having important implications for business professionals. Nevertheless, although so much academic and professional work has been dedicated to the concept of social capital, this effort has been mainly focused on the study of inter-organizational relations (Zheng, 2008). In this study we focus on the social capital generated in intra-organizational relations. As a state of art in the literature, we can find recent theoretical studies (e.g. Maak, 2007) in which a call is made for ethical leaders to enable the creation of value networks to succeed. In the same direction, others works (e.g. Pastoriza, Ariño & Ricart, 2009) analyze how the generation of an ethical work context can influence positively on the generation of organizational social capital (OSC), by postulating that OSC is a by-product of a humanizing culture that is concreted in management practices and organizational dynamics. So, in an attempt of concretizing on theoretical studies of antecedents of OSC, we consider that ethical leadership may play a transcendental role, specifically the servant approach, since this type of leadership is thought to have an influence on disseminating both ethical values and community values into groups of people they lead, all of which is considered very helpful in the generation of social capital inside the organization.

In order to structure this research, the main aim of this article is to build a theoretical and lineal model in which we focus on three main aspects of OSC: Origin, dimensions and the direct effect on value creation. For the first one, the origin of social capital, we pay attention on the role of servant leadership as a key element in generating an organizational culture flattering OSC. Next, we study OSC as a multidimensional concept reflecting the structural, relational and cognitive characteristics in a relationship. And as a final part of our model, we analyze the effect in value generation of social capital. All these three parts are presented as a basic theoretical model that depicts our study. Finally, the last section concludes by summarizing the main conclusions and proposes practical implications for management and practitioners.

ORGANIZATIONAL ETHICAL AND COMMUNITY CULTURE AS ANTECEDENT OF OSC: THE ROLE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Traditionally, regarding antecedents of OSC, organizational factors (policies, systems, procedures, and manager's type of behaviour) have been the main focus of attention for scholars (Pastoriza *et al.*, 2009) which suggest that generating such a valuable resource is possible and accessible for Management. Promoting certain values, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes may make a difference on that matter, from which it is deduced that the design of the organizational culture is essential, that is, the group of assumptions, values and beliefs which are shared in an organization (Smircich, 1983) and which communicate the right way of thinking, acting and feeling in an organization (Schein, 1992). Hence, if OSC is wanted to be promoted, moving employees' mind towards more associability and citizenship behaviours is needed, and culture of values serve precisely in fulfilling this purpose. However, we can not obviate an essential ingredient for shaping the organizational culture: the leader figure (Schein, 1992), which successfully gets followers to adhere to a certain style of thinking and behaving (Bass, 1990). Drawing on theories of leadership we find one approach coincident with the idea of fostering associability, citizenship and even ethicality: the servant leadership.

Servant leadership and its role in creating both an ethical and a community culture

The concept of servant leadership started to appear in literature by means of published seminal works by Greenleaf three decades ago (1977, 1979). The so great interest attracted by this theoretical approach from scholarship can be reflected in a great number of works (e.g. Senge, 1990; Boyyet & Boyyet, 1996; Graham, 1995) in which characteristics and principles on this style of leadership have been discussed. The main aspect which characterizes this approach rests upon the way of understanding the leadership, which is possible it had been already stated in the pioneer studies on leadership at the State University of Ohio. In those studies, considerate treatment was one of the crucial dimensions on which a good and efficient leadership could rest, that is, appreciation, empathy and attention paid to followers (Melé, 2000) which can be reflected on the theory of servant leadership, which states that servant leaders lead

because they see themselves as servants (Greenleaf, 1977). That idea of service to others, but not meaning servitude is encompassed in the development of ten characteristics that Spears (1995) has gathered after a thoroughly review of Greenleaf's writings (1977): listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, building community and finally, commitment to the growth of the follower. On the one hand, a group of these personal characteristics makes servant leaders be strongly oriented to people, which attract in a great extent, the free adhesion of followers. They show a deep commitment to listening intently to others, striving to understand and empathize with them. They, in addition, are characterized for emotionally healing relationships with others, relationships which have been distorted or even healing people who are emotionally collapsed. They rely more on persuasion that on coercion to get the adhesion of followers and they strongly commit to serving the needs of personal, professional and spiritual growth of others, steward organizations in trust for the greater good of society and build social community amongst all those who work in the same organization. On the other hand, servant leaders also present some characteristics useful for the long-term adequate and ethical management and leadership of an organization such as the ability for foreseeing the likely outcome of a situation by means of understanding from the past, present and future; the cultivation of awareness which helps to understand issues involving ethics, power and values and the ability of facing problems from a perspective which encompass broader based conceptual thinking.

As seen, hence, two possible kinds of values may be organizationally promoted by servant leadership among employees. Indeed, most of characteristics servant leaders entail (i.e. emotionally healing, commitment to the growing of others, building social community, stewardship in trust for the greater good of society) made a culture of building social community possible into the organization. As Greenleaf (1977) states, servant leaders' actions are always guided for the common good and in the pursuit of this purpose not only do they free followers from protecting self interest but also subordinate it to the pursuit of the group and the organizational objectives (Graham, 1995). To serve needs and interests of every organizational participant becomes the main purpose to fulfil in organizations which are led by servant leaders (Graham, 1995), which found empirical support in empirical literature (e.g. Ehrhart, 2004). However, that is not the only value which is fostered by servant leaders. In fact, servant leaders entail those suitable characteristics for creating an

ethical work community between them and the led (Giampetro-Meyer, Brown, Browne & Kubasek, 1998). Firstly, as seen, servant leaders present personal characteristics linked to behaving ethically (i.e. foresight, awareness, conceptual thinking), leading them to be prudent and long term thinking when making decisions and behaving. Secondly and more importantly, not only servant leaders are focused on followers but also, as a consequence of the influence exercised, they cultivate on followers the attitude of service to common good. Hence, no opportunity for unethical actions is possible since if people are guided by means of such attitude, that is, if they are, transcendentally motivated (Pérez López, 1998), they are looking only for the goodness of others, both internal and external to the organization (Greenleaf, 1977), which humanizes any action or decision committed (Guillén, 2006) and leads to a higher human moral development (Graham, 1995).

In summary, servant leadership becomes a good promoter not only of a community culture but also of an ethical culture, especially if servant leadership is made perceptible by Top Management. That is the hierarchical position where value-leadership must start to have an effect on the whole organization (Schroeder, 2002) since servant leadership practiced at the Top may flow down the organization as a cascading effect (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes & Salvador, 2009) and the formal and informal structures, mechanisms and procedures are thought to easily change, all of which constitutes an organizational culture fostering servant leadership and attitudes among all the employees.

Community-ethical culture and their relationship to organizational social capital

Although fostering community and ethical values may look something different, in reality they are not. Servant attitude to others is necessarily linked to ethicality in actions, since ethicality refers in part to behaviour and consequences of it in and for society. Indeed, as Guillén (2006) states, to behave ethically is essential for individuals to human excel, which is the only desired end according to Aristotle's ancient classical thinking (*Nic. Ethics*).

However, to behave ethically is also good for others as no harm is produced to them. Taking this into account, if individuals are always worried about satisfying the needs of others and are focused on the needs

of others, that is, practice a servant attitude, unethical actions are not possible in relationships. The contrary may even be true as some studies seem to suggest (Turnipseed, 2002), since if individuals are ethical, as they cultivate moral virtues and try to human excel, they surely find in serving a virtuous way for achieving it (Guillén, 2006). Hence, servant leadership can be thought to promote both types of linked values and as consequence, OSC is suggested to arise easier with this type of leadership. Indeed, if as defined by Leana & van Buren (1999: 540), OSC is understood as "a resource reflecting the character of social relations within a firm through member's level of associability and shared trust", neither ethics nor building community can be separated from that definition but both of them act together in interaction to make a difference in generating OSC, by means of promoting three necessary elements for it: trust, associability (Leana & van Buren, 1999) and even a common narrative (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998). On the one hand, building community thinking perception by the individual on organizational context, leads to openness to others and helpful behaviour among individuals, so collaboration and personal interactions may spread along the organization. On the other hand, ethical context promoting ethical behaviour will produce a trustful environment (Treviño, Hartman & Brown, 2000) which is the base for stable (Blau, 1964) and successful relationships in the long term (Treviño *et al.*, 2000) which in turn produces a common language structure useful for additional future social interactions. In summary, then, the creation of OSC can find on both ethical and community building values an important accessible promoting source.

ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL:
A MULTIDIMENSIONAL VIEW

Research in social capital has become a popular way of denoting many kinds of resources appropriable from interpersonal relationships (Sandefur & Laumann, 2000). It is relatively easy to describe social capital as the wealth or benefit that exists because of an individual's social relationships (Lesser, 2000). This definition still disregards many theoretical aspects of the concept of social capital. In order to be concise and clear we focus on the three main dimensions that are researched in the social capital literature that influence the development of the mutual benefits of social capital.

There are three primary dimensions: the structure of the relations (structural dimension), the interpersonal dynamics that exist within the structure (relational dimension) and the common context and language held by individuals in the structure (cognitive dimension). These dimensions were proposed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) and reflect related characteristics that depict relationships. Regarding the structural dimension, we can find two main schools of thought. The first school includes researchers such as Sandefur and Laumann (2000), who are more concerned with the connections that individual actors have with one another. This point of view is referred as the egocentric perspective on social networks. The second school is referred as the sociocentric approach school which is based on the writings of Ronald Burt who believes that the social capital is based on a person's relative position within a given network rather than the individual's direct relationship (Lesser, 2000). In relation to the structural dimension and considering that the development of social capital is not limited to the presence of contacts within the given network, we can also find that the second dimension, the relational, reflects positive interactions between individuals and concepts such as trust and reciprocity which become the focal point of social capital formation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Finally, we identify the cognitive dimension or the *common language* that individuals can use which includes but goes beyond languages, and addresses also the acronyms, subtleties and underlying assumptions that are the necessities of everyday communication (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

As can be appreciated, these three dimensions reflect the nature of social relations within the firm, realized through members' levels of collective goal orientation, shared trust and common language which create value by facilitating successful collective action. In terms of OSC, these dimensions are mainly reflected, on the one hand, in the concept of associability, which is defined as the willingness and capability of organizational members to make individual goals and actions subject to collective goals and actions (Leana & van Buren, 1999). On the other hand, trust is a necessary concept arising in terms of OSC, because it it really necessary for individuals to work together for a common goal and facilitate a collective action. The opposite is also true since collective action also builds trust which suggests that a two-way interaction exist between trust and cooperation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and that both aspects must coexist to generate OSC. Eventually, another enabler of OSC is common language. Shared representation, interpretation and systems of meaning among people in the same social network, such as

shared narratives, shared language and shared codes, are necessary for the successful achievement of goals established for a workgroup. In summary, the three components: associability, trust and shared language are required at least to some extent to generate OSC.

ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL AND BUSINESS VALUE CREATION

Management scholars have adopted and used the concept of OSC to explain individual, group and organizational performance for years. From this perspective, OSC is mainly valued for its potential benefits as it has been found to possess the ability to attain desirable outcomes in a wide range of social sciences (Field, 2003). For example, in terms of economic benefits, social capital is thought to enhance job search effectiveness, facilitate resource exchange, minimize redundancy, increase efficiency, develop intellectual capital, enhance creativity and innovation, improve economic performance and so on, at individual, organizational, communal, national and regional levels (Granovetter, 1973; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Paying attention specifically to the literature on Theory of Resources and Capabilities, we can find that the value generated through OSC is linked with key basic resources and capabilities for generating and maintaining competitive advantages in the market (Barney, 1991). Indeed, notorious is the literature indicating the importance that OSC has for promoting interaction between the internal capabilities and exchange of knowledge into the organization (Caloghirou, Kastelly & Tsakanikas, 2004; Quintana & Benavides, 2006). OSC has an important impact on knowledge creation capability, by playing an important role for its transfer within the organization. That is what is suggested when some literature (e.g. Dyer & Sigh, 1998; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005) is analized which emphasizes that the strength of the linkages in any relationship allows access to a wider range of high quality tacit knowledge and may provide mechanisms for different actors to integrate existing knowledge and improve their capabilities. Thus, firms with higher social capital are better performing from their internal and innovation capabilities because they are in a better position to identify opportunities (Lee, Lee & Pennings, 2001).

In summary, we have noted the important positive effect of OSC on

the company's internal capabilities and on business value generation. As Caloghirou *et al.* (2004) points out, the existence of a role set of internal capabilities permits to develop new products, by facilitating internal creativity and skills and making possible that company's internal staff interact. Hence, OSC improving and increasing the innovation process, not only by generating access to better technological capabilities and providing additional knowledge on different abilities (Yli-Renko, Autio & Sapienza, 2001) but also encouraging product quality, innovation and creativity (Danneels, 2002).

A *SERVANT LEADERSHIP* MODEL FOR DETERMINING OSC AND BUSINESS VALUE

As shown on Figure 1, the above described statements make the following theoretical model up for determining OSC and behavioural and attitudinal consequences among employees focused on generating business value. The model here elaborated is mainly differentiated in three stages.

With regard to the first stage, the model states that servant leadership is an active promoter of both an ethical culture and a community culture into the organization. All literature supports this idea, linking personal traits of servant leaders to ethicality and community building in the work environment. Indeed, servant leaders lead because of the servant attitude, trying to achieve that followers become servants too and even servant leaders in their work scopes (Greenleaf, 1977). On the one hand, personal traits which are related to moral virtues as temperance and that leads people to look for the long term and then for the moral right behaviour/decision, are promoted among followers. On the other hand, characteristics such as listening, empathizing, emotionally healing, and so on, lead individuals not only to ethically behave but also to develop citizenship actions focused on others, especially on workmates and other members that facilitate to achieve both an ethical culture and a community culture.

Regarding the second stage, the model proposes a positive relationship which is thought to be between on the one hand, both an ethical and a community culture, and, on the other hand, OSC. Indeed, values fostered and experimented thanks to both types of culture, represent, even though in a complex way, a key for associability, trust and a common language of individuals, that is, OSC.
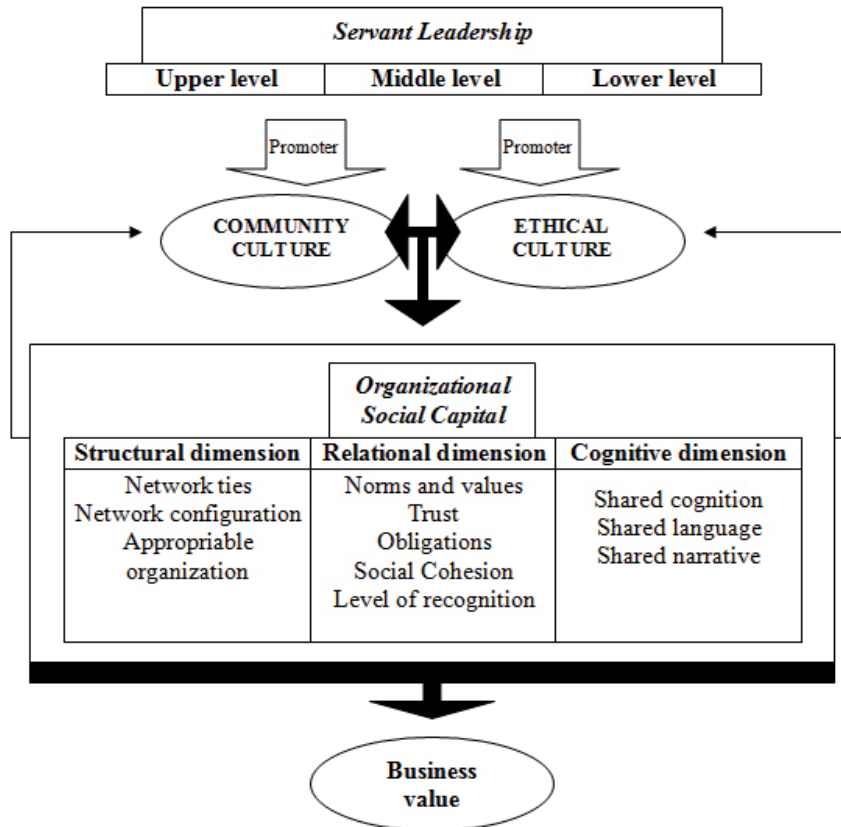
Figure 1. A model for OSC and value generation
from a servant leadership perspective

First of all, both types of values are reciprocally and positively linked, surely not coming to light separately; and secondly, they may have a direct influence on generating OSC but clearly in interaction they are expected to have a greater influence on getting free social interactions, open relationships and strong ties among individuals, all of them focused on the pursuit of organizational collective goals. In addition, they shed light for a probable bidirectional relationship between both types of culture and OSC. Pastoriza *et al.* (2009) suggest it when postulating that a feedback loop of OSC on organizational context exists. According to them, the final establishment of the organizational context is an ongoing process which continuously feedbacks from both systems, structural context and

behavioural context (Pastoriza *et al.*, 2009), so as more links, ties and/ or interactions exist between employees, more influenced the individual is thought to be by the values, actions and attitudes perceived in the context. Social relationship networks constitute a source of restrictions or opportunities of behaving (Brass, Butterfield & Skaggs, 1998) and lead to shared reference thinking (Granitz, 2003) so a relationship is thought to exist for OSC and ethical and community cultures.

Finally, as a consequence of the presence of social capital into the organization, knowledge and information transfer, collective learning and cooperation are expected to be risen into the organization (Dyer & Singh, 1998). This is the third and last part of the model here elaborated which links OSC to the facilitation of a branch of intangible resources, such as knowledge and information access, leading to the generation of intellectual capital (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998) that facilitate the development of collective knowledge (Zucker, Darby, Brewer & Peng, 1996), the sharing of experiences, information and improvement of abilities, internal capabilities and creativity and innovative behaviour among employees.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

In this paper we have advanced a theoretical model that attempts to shed some light on how social capital can be generated into the organization from an ethical perspective. We proposed that servant leadership may play a central role in generating such an intangible resource, having a strong impact on the content of the organizational culture that employees perceive and that serves as behavioural and attitudinal guide. This leadership may represent a figure to be fostered among all the hierarchical levels of the organization due to the influence it can exercise on creating an ethical culture and a community culture -key enablers for the generation of OSC-. Further, we proposed that OSC allows the exchange of knowledge -explicit and tacit-through relations among employees that can be exploited to create new internal capabilities, thus causing a significant effect on employee creativity, the development of new innovations and therefore in generating value for the firm. Hence, the theoretical implication we have proposed is that firms must promote the active role of their leaders in becoming and developing a strong servant style of behaving that firstly can improve the generation of a community and an ethical culture and next, enable the generation of

OSC. This highlights the importance of ethics for successful business and underlines that as commonly assumed; ethics cannot be obviated never in people's life (either private or public). To behave ethically leads to individuals to human excel (Guillén, 2006) but also develops valuable networks that can improve the generation of value in organizations, especially through such valuable intangible resource as OSC is.

There are obvious limitations in this paper. One of them refers to the theoretical approach taken for studying OSC and its antecedents. However, it not only fills a gap in literature showing the relevance of practicing servant leadership in business but also opens avenues for future empirical research on OSC and antecedents. Another limitation is that as antecedents of OSC we have only considered servant leadership and the consequences of it. However, causal factors traditionally considered in literature fit perfectly with the ones here considered, since all of them refer to certain organizational aspects (policies, systems, procedures, etc.) which undoubtedly are a consequence of leadership of managers and culture of values of an organization. Finally, it is necessary to state that the theoretical model here elaborated does not take the moderating role of other possible organizational and individual contingencies into account and does also not attempt to explain the generation of value as a whole. The model rather explains that in a partial way, by having a focus on value generated by OSC through the interaction of two cultures produced by the use of a particular ethical leadership style among organizational members. Further research, hence, is required in order to better understand the complex causal nature of this phenomenon, including the exhaustive study of other moderating causal factors.

Future research may wish to develop theoretical propositions taking as a reference the model here proposed and also want to test the model in a sample of business organizations. In doing that, important implications for literature on management can be delineated, since it would covered not only if in reality servant leadership is possible to be practiced in business but also if it is necessary for the adequate and successful operation of the organization. In this sense, a direction for future research may also be that of having a focus on the nature of measurement of a community culture. Regarding an ethical culture, much literature exists on the main aspects to be considered (Key, 1999) but a comprehensive focus and study on the main aspects that make a community culture seems to be necessary prior to empirical testing. Finally, another aspect that would be important to study would be the effects of each of the dimensions of social capital

raised into the organization. We have only referred to the general value generated into the organization through OSC but literature exists regarding the specific aspects (i.e. attitudes, behaviour, capabilities, abilities) on which the different dimensions and their independent effect on the creation of firm value have an effect, so a distinction in this matter would add value both to this paper's contribution and literature on management.

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