

# **Servant Leadership, Trust, and the Organizational Commitment of Public Sector Employees in China**

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## **Abstract**

Servant leaders strive selflessly and altruistically to assist others before themselves, work to develop their followers to their greatest potential, and seek to benefit the wider community. This paper examines the trust-based mechanisms by which servant leadership influences organizational commitment in the Chinese public sector, using data from a survey of civil servants. Quantitative analysis shows that servant leadership strongly influences affective and normative commitment, while having no impact on continuance commitment. Furthermore, we find that affective trust rather than cognitive trust is the mechanism by which servant leadership induces higher levels of commitment. Our findings suggest that in a time of decreasing confidence levels in public leaders, servant leadership behavior may be used to reestablish trust and create legitimacy for the Chinese civil service.

## **Keywords**

Leadership; Organizational Commitment; Trust.

## Introduction

In his recent comprehensive review of the administrative leadership literature, Van Wart (2013) noted that the changing historical, cultural, economic and political contexts for public managers require new leadership behaviors. Many public organizations around the world are experiencing a decline in public confidence due to corruption and other self-serving tendencies of their officials. As a result, the public increasingly longs for leaders who set aside their self-interest for the betterment of their followers and the wider community (Han *et al.* 2010). One approach to leadership, named servant leadership, focuses on this type of leader who is service-oriented and strives selflessly and altruistically to assist others first before themselves (Greenleaf 1977). Servant leaders work to develop their followers to their greatest potential by serving as role models who exhibit ethical behavior, provide support, and build self-confidence (Sendjaya *et al.* 2008). As well as helping their followers, they also practice their service orientation outside the organization by exhibiting concern for citizens and communities at large (Graham 1991).

Previous research has linked servant leadership to a number of positive group- and individual-level outcomes, such as enhanced organizational citizenship behavior (Walumbwa *et al.* 2010), procedural justice (Ehrhart 2004), increased job satisfaction (Mayer *et al.* 2008), and helping behavior (Neubert *et al.* 2008). There is also growing evidence of the effectiveness of servant leaders in engendering organizational commitment amongst their subordinates (Liden *et al.* 2008). Organizational commitment has been studied by public administration scholars as it relates to various positive attitudinal and behavioral consequences, including greater motivation and better job performance (Angle and Perry 1981, Balfour and Wechsler 1990, Dick 2011, Steinhaus and Perry 1996, Vandenabeele 2009). Despite the growing attention on servant leadership in the literature, limited research has examined the prevalence of servant leadership in

the public sector, its effectiveness in promoting positive employee attitudes, and the exact mechanisms by which it weaves its effects. We aim to address these research gaps by examining the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment in the context of the Chinese public sector. Our study thus responds to the calls from Parris and Peachey (2013), for more investigation of servant leadership within public organizations, and from Su *et al.* (2013), for more focused research about Chinese administration that allow hypothesis testing.

This article makes two main contributions to the existing literature. First, it examines whether servant leadership can be used to promote positive attitudes among public sector employees. This has not been studied yet, in spite of the fact that recent studies have highlighted the importance of supportive managerial practices to organizational commitment in public sector organizations (Dick 2011; Gould-Williams 2004; Steijn and Leisink 2006).

Second, the present research makes a contribution by focusing on the role of trust in engendering organizational commitment. While prior research has found a strong association between servant leadership and subordinate trust in supervisor (Joseph and Winston 2005), this work did not examine its mediating effects on subordinate attitudes, and treated trust as a uni-dimensional construct. We examine whether servant leadership influences organizational commitment by leading to the development of affective trust or cognitive trust. This enables us to test the salience of the social-exchange theory (Blau 1964), which has been used to explain how leaders influence positive work attitudes amongst their subordinates.

Servant leadership is particularly relevant in the Chinese public sector, which continues to undergo fundamental change through attempts to improve administrative capacity (Su *et al.* 2013). Creating a capable civil service is a major objective of Chinese administrative reforms (Xue and Zhong 2012). Over the past few years, China's political elite has increasingly called for

more ‘service-oriented’ administrative leadership, in support of the central government’s focus on building a harmonious society and the campaigns against the rampant corruption that led to the arrests of ‘princeling’ Bo Xilai, who was expected to take a key leadership position in the Communist Party, as well as other high-profile individuals, such as the Beijing Communist Party Chief, the Shanghai Communist Party Chief, the Mayor of Shenzhen, the Vice-Governors of Hebei and Anhui Provinces, the Minister of Railway Administration and the Deputy Director of General Administration of Customs in China (Gong and Wu 2012; Xue and Liou 2012). In light of these high-profile corruption cases, then Chinese President Hu Jintao emphasized the need for government officials to act selflessly to best serve society (Holzer and Zhang 2009). In essence, this was a call for more servant leadership, and our study investigates how Chinese public sector employees respond to this.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **Servant Leadership**

The term “servant leadership” was coined by Greenleaf (1970) in his book “The Servant as Leader”. He refers to servant leaders as those who strive to serve individuals under them, develop those being served, and benefit others in society. Greenleaf was inspired by the book “Journey to the East” by Nobel Laureate Hermann Hesse, in which a group of travelers in India is assisted by a servant. After the servant disappears, the group becomes dysfunctional and breaks up. Later on, the travelers realize that their servant was in fact a highly respected leader.

Greenleaf emphasizes going beyond one’s self interest as a major characteristic of servant leaders (Van Dierendonck 2011). Servant leadership is a group-focused approach to leadership in which the leader is merely a “primus inter pares”, a first among equals (Ehrhart 2004; Greenleaf

1977). Although servant leaders work primarily as stewards to their followers, striving to create opportunities for their growth and development, they also seek to benefit the wider community by encouraging their followers to be socially responsible, and serve others in the wider society (Searle and Barbuto 2011).

### **Servant Leadership in the Public Sector**

Although Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) urged public leaders to “serve, not steer”, with the exception of Van Wart (2003) and Han *et al.* (2010), the term “servant leadership” has found scant attention in the public sector literature. Servant leaders are similar to Hart’s (1984) “honorable bureaucrats” who act in a morally significant manner, exhibit genuine care for those whom they serve, conduct their affairs on the basis of trust, and feel that they have to benefit others more than they benefit themselves.

The incomplete picture obtained from an exclusive focus on self-concerned behavior regarding the true motives of public officials is also increasingly being emphasized within the growing PSM literature (Perry and Wise 1990). This stream of literature argues that public sector organizations attract, select, and inspire individuals with specific attributes (Houston 2011; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Taylor 2013). Although PSM scholars do not use the term servant leadership explicitly, some of the essential servant leadership characteristics, such as other-oriented motives, are listed as important factors which influence the choice of public service careers (Kim and Vandenberg 2011; Pedersen 2013; Wright 2000). Hence, servant leaders may also be expected to have a relatively high PSM rating. However, servant leadership is different from PSM given it measures the extent that leaders set aside their self-interest to focus on

developing and instilling a service orientation in their subordinates, rather than their own motivation to serve the wider community.

As people with a high PSM score are more likely to work in government (Bright 2005; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999), servant leaders may be more prevalent in the public sector than in private firms. This may also be due to the fact that Greenleaf's conception of the servant leader was shaped by his own experiences as an executive at AT&T (Reed *et al.* 2011), an organization that, during his tenure, was a heavily regulated behemoth that provided monopoly services and that was more akin to a public sector bureaucracy than a private firm.

### **Servant Leadership in the Chinese Government**

It is a particularly apt time to study servant leadership in the Chinese public sector. Although China has witnessed sustained economic growth over the course of the last two decades, it has been plagued with growing inequality, environmental degradation, and rampant corruption in recent years (Liu and Tang 2011; Wu *et al.* 2013). This can be evidenced by the growth in the number of citizen protests and activism in the recent past. In recognition of these social problems, soon after becoming President in 2003, Hu Jintao proposed the need to build a service-oriented public sector in which government officials should work selflessly for the good of the people and wider society. He stressed the importance of strong leadership in building a fair, capable, and sustainable public service, which will help in the development of a 'harmonious society' (Holzer and Zhang 2009). Whereas in the past, the government's main aim was economic development, and public administration reform was considered merely necessary in order not to stifle economic growth, social objectives and the needs of the general public are featured more prominently in the new administration (Xue and Zhang 2013). As a result,

modules highlighting the importance of socially responsible and ethical leadership have become standard in Master in Public Administration (MPA) programs across China (Wu and He 2009), and common in leadership training courses run by the party. These changes should have contributed towards the development of a ‘servant’ or ‘service-oriented’ leadership culture in Chinese public sector organizations (Dong *et al.* 2010).

Han *et al.* (2010) cite Confucianism, Daoism, and Communism as a major impetus for the dissemination of servant leadership in Chinese Government. Model Confucian leaders are sensitive to the needs of their subordinates, and strive to assist them through acting altruistically and exhibiting compassion and kindness. Daoism embraces serving the community at large, emphasizing humility, leading by example, and empowering others – all characteristics found in servant leaders (Cheung and Chan 2008). With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took over the political, organizational, and moral leadership of the country (Chan and Gao 2013; Jing and Zhu 2012), and communist ideology was introduced into the Chinese administrative system. Communist leaders are expected to place the collective interest ahead of their own and serve the people, aims that are also pursued by servant leaders. Although like Confucianism and Daoism, Communism condemns corrupt behavior, the lack of competition and control inherent in a system dominated by a single party, led to high-profile corruption cases that warrant a more servant leadership style. The 1993 Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants established China’s modern civil service system. It stipulates entry level exams, performance-based appraisals, and competitive salary levels (Xue and Liou 2012). It was superseded by a permanent Civil Service Law that took effect in 2006, which added a dimension of integrity to the annual performance appraisal of civil servants (Dong *et al.* 2010). The honesty of civil servants is assessed by their supervisors and also by their

colleagues – a process that aims to make unreported corrupt behavior less likely and involve employees more in their workplace (Liu and Dong 2012), which should make them more committed to their workplace. The relationship between servant leadership and attitude change with regard to organizational commitment and trust will be analyzed in the next sections.

### **Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment**

In the present study, the three-component model of organizational commitment as developed by Meyer and his colleagues (Allen and Meyer 1990; Meyer *et al.* 1993) is utilized to measure the impact of servant leadership on the organizational commitment of public sector employees. It is the most widely used model in the literature and has been validated in a whole host of cultural settings and industrial contexts (Chen and Francesco 2003; Park and Rainey 2007). The three-component model distinguishes among three ‘psychological states’ (Chen and Francesco 2003), affective, normative and continuance commitment. Affective commitment refers to an employee’s emotional attachment to, involvement in, and identification with the organization (Nyhan 1999). Normative commitment, relates to an employee’s feelings of obligation to maintain membership in the organization (Caillier 2013). Continuance commitment refers to the perceived costs to the employee of leaving the organization, for example due to the cessation of work relationships and the non-transferability of accumulated job skills (Allen and Meyer 1990).

Previously, little was known as to how servant leadership affects each of the three commitment mindsets towards the organization. Empirical studies have typically used uni-dimensional measures of commitment rather than distinguishing among the different mindsets when investigating such issues (Liden *et al.* 2008).



Social exchange theory (Blau 1964) has been used to explain why servant leadership enhances subordinates' organizational commitment (Liden *et al.* 2008). As supervisors are often personified as the 'face' or 'representative' of the organization, responsible for implementing organizational policy, positive treatment by supervisors should lead subordinates to reciprocate in the form of desired work attitudes such as organizational commitment. Through providing subordinates with support and opportunities to learn new skills, develop themselves and participate in decision-making, servant leaders should lead subordinates' to reciprocate through heightening their emotional attachment to, and identification with the organization, in the form of higher levels of affective commitment. In addition, given the supervisor is the main representative of the organization, the receipt of positive treatment from a servant leader is also likely to engender stronger feelings of obligation to the organization, in the form of higher levels of normative commitment. Although there is a dearth of research examining the relationship between servant leadership and both affective and normative commitment, recent studies highlight a link between supportive supervisory practices and these dimensions of commitment amongst Chinese public sector employees (Miao *et al.* 2013). This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H1: Servant leadership is positively related to affective commitment

H2: Servant leadership is positively related to normative commitment

The influence of leadership on continuance commitment has been associated with economic rather than social exchange (Shore *et al.* 2006). The loss of productive and supportive working relationships with other organizational members including supervisors has been identified as the major cost of discontinuing organizational membership (Meyer *et al.* 1991;

Payne and Huffman 2005). Given that servant leaders provide their subordinates with opportunities to get involved in decision-making, craft their jobs and support skill development, leaving the organization may lead to the loss of such opportunities. Leaving the organization could bring significant sacrifice, as subordinates would have to invest in developing a relationship with a new supervisor who may not be as supportive as the current servant leader. In the context of Chinese public sector organizations, where supervisors play a central role in determining career progression, subordinates may also be extremely fearful of losing career development opportunities under a servant leader with whom they have built up a significant understanding and who nurtures their potential (Liu and Dong 2012). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H3: Servant leadership is positively related to continuance commitment

### **Trust in Leader as a Mediating Mechanism**

Previous studies have shown a strong link between servant leadership and organizational commitment (Liden *et al.* 2008), yet there has been limited empirical analysis of the mechanisms underlying this relationship. Trust in supervisor has been considered as a mechanism to explain the effects of servant leadership behavior of supervisors on subordinate work attitudes (Van Dierendonck 2011), but so far no direct test of its mediating effects on organizational commitment has been undertaken. Previous work argues that trust in supervisor is important given that it captures the quality of social exchange between the supervisor and subordinate (Huang *et al.* 2010). However, this seems to neglect the multifaceted nature of trust, and does not explain fully how trust weaves its influence on subordinate work attitudes.

McAllister (1995) suggests that there are two main dimensions of trust which influence the attitudinal response of subordinates to the behavior of their immediate supervisor: one is instrumental in nature and the other more relational. The former dimension of trust, cognitive trust, refers to the trust which results from a rational evaluation of the supervisor's salient personal characteristics such as their competence, dependability, and reliability by the subordinate (Wang *et al.* 2010). The latter, recognized as affective trust, refers to what develops from the emotional ties between the subordinate and the supervisor as they engage in a process of social exchange (Yang and Mossholder 2010). It develops when the subordinate genuinely believes that the supervisor cares for their welfare and acts with their wellbeing in mind (Colquitt *et al.* 2007).

We suggest several reasons why affective trust will more strongly mediate the impact of servant leadership on affective and normative commitment than cognitive trust. First, through the provision of individualized support and encouragement (Ehrhart 2004), servant leaders should be perceived as being genuinely concerned about the well-being of their subordinates. This should serve to strengthen the relational bond between the two parties, and elicit higher levels of affective trust. Second, through encouraging subordinates' involvement in decision-making (Hunter *et al.* 2013), servant leaders also exhibit a willingness to build strong interpersonal relationships that go beyond specific economic exchange and signal that they care about their subordinates' feelings and opinions. This should in turn, lead subordinates to reciprocate in the form of positive attitudes in the workplace, such as affective and normative commitment. Finally, affective trust should engender a stronger emotional response in Chinese subordinates because, in a collectivist culture (Hwang 2000), personal relationships between individuals are more highly valued than in the West (Cheng *et al.* 2003; Tan and Chee 2005). This should lead to

stronger emotional connections and feeling of obligation (i.e., affective trust), and a greater willingness to reciprocate in the form of affective and normative commitment. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H4: Affective trust more strongly mediates the relationship between servant leadership and affective commitment than cognitive trust

H5: Affective trust more strongly mediates the relationship between servant leadership and normative commitment than cognitive trust

Cognitive trust can be expected to have less influence on the continuous commitment of Chinese public sector employees due to an institutional context characterized by higher levels of job security and lower staff turnover than in the private sector (Robertson *et al.* 2007). The transition from a planned to a market economy has led to a dismantling of the traditional iron rice bowl system that guaranteed lifelong employment and welfare in many areas, such as state-owned enterprises (Kuruvilla *et al.* 2011). Typically, Chinese civil servants seem to consider their employment to be relatively secure and long-term unless a grave mistake is committed on the job (Meng and Wu 2012). This traditional confidence in job security remains substantially intact despite civil service reform (Jing and Zhu 2012), numerous rounds of restructuring (Xue and Zhong 2012) and recent pilot programs offering only one-to-five year employment contracts. In this context of perceived job certainty, cognitive trust is likely to have a weaker effect on subordinate attitudes than affective trust given that the competence and the reliability of the supervisor is unlikely to have a significant influence on the job security and mobility of the subordinate (Dirks and Ferrin 2002). This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H6: Affective trust more strongly mediates the relationship between servant leadership and continuance commitment than cognitive trust

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedures**

Participants in this study were recruited from an alumni database of MPA graduates from the College of Public Administration, Zhejiang University. Invitations were sent out in April 2011 by e-mail to 1000 alumni requesting their participation in a three wave-survey. For our research purposes, we required that participants work full-time in a government department within Zhejiang Province and have close contact with their immediate supervisor. If they accepted the invitation, participants were provided with a link to the three separate surveys at two-week intervals. The survey was administered at three different time periods in order to reduce the likelihood of common method variance of self-reported survey data. According to Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), the introduction of a temporal separation between the measurement of predictor and criterion variables should reduce biases through eliminating the saliency of contextually provided retrieval cues and reduce the respondent's ability to use previously provided responses when answering subsequent questions.

Participants rated the servant leadership behavior of their supervisor in the first time period, their affective and cognitive trust in supervisor in the second time period, and their organizational commitment in the third and final time period. In total, 239 participants provided full responses to all three waves of the study, accounting for a response rate of around 24 per cent.

In all, 63.2 per cent of our sample was male and 59 per cent held leadership positions. 93.3 per cent of the participants were under the age of 40, and 77 per cent had been working under their current supervisor for less than five years. In order to ensure our sample was representative of career-level employees in the Chinese public sector we compared the demographics of the sample against general demographic information of career-level public-sector employees in Zhejiang Province, and found no significant differences in terms of age and gender distribution. In 2011, for example, the average age of civil servants in this province was approximately 34 years of age and males accounted for 61.2 per cent of the population.

## **Measures**

***Servant Leadership.*** The 14-item servant leadership scale developed by Ehrhart (2004) was used to measure servant leadership (see appendix 1). This measure was chosen as it has been widely used and validated in prior research (Hunter *et al.* 2013; Mayer *et al.* 2008; Neubert *et al.* 2008; Walumbwa *et al.* 2010), as highlighted by a recent systematic literature review on servant leadership (Parris and Peachey 2013). It was developed based on an extant review of the literature, and empirically validated on two separate samples in the original study. Each participant was required to rate the servant leadership of his or her immediate supervisor on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.96.

***Trust.*** McAllister's (1995) five- and six-item affect and cognition-based trust scales were used to obtain self-reported measures of affective and cognitive trust from subordinates. Respondents were asked to rate their trust in their immediate supervisor on a five-point Likert scale ranging

from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. A sample item included: 'This person approaches his/her job with professionalism and dedication'. The Cronbach Alphas for these scales were 0.94 and 0.95.

**Organizational Commitment.** Organizational commitment was measured using the 18-item organizational commitment scale developed by Meyer *et al.* (1993). This scale contains three separate six-item scales to measure affective, normative, and continuance commitment respectively. As with the other measures, each respondent was required to rate his or her organizational commitment on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. A sample item included: 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career at this organization'. The Cronbach Alphas for these scales were 0.93, 0.87 and 0.79 respectively.

**Control Variables.** Five control variables were included in the analysis: gender, tenure with one's direct supervisor, age, organizational level and pay satisfaction. Gender was coded as a dummy variable where 0= female and 1= male. Tenure with supervisor and age were coded as 1 through 8 in time periods of 5 years. Organizational level was coded 1 through 4 representing non-managerial employees, section managers, department managers, and senior managers respectively. Pay satisfaction was measured using a three-item developed by Malhotra *et al.* (2007) to control for the effects of extrinsic benefits. A sample item included 'I am satisfied with the amount of pay I receive for the job I do'. The Cronbach Alpha for this scale was 0.88.

## **Analysis and Results**

The means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients of all study variables are reported in table 1.

[Table 1 here]

Before hypothesis testing could be conducted, a measurement model was estimated using confirmatory factor analysis in LISREL 8.80 to ascertain the goodness-of-fit of the study variables. A full measurement model containing seven factors (servant leadership, affective trust, cognitive trust, affective commitment, normative commitment, cognitive commitment and pay satisfaction) was compared with a series of alternative models as shown in table 2. The fit indices of the seven-factor model were stronger than those of alternative models ( $X^2= 2278.35$ ,  $df= 968$ ,  $RMSEA= .07$ ,  $IFI= .97$ ,  $CFI= .97$ ), indicating support for the distinctiveness of the variables used in the study. As this study utilized self-reported data from single respondents, a Harman's one-factor test was conducted to rule out common method bias. The items from all seven factors were combined into a single factor and compared with that of the seven-factor model. The results of the one-factor model were significantly weaker than that of the seven-factor model, indicating that common method bias was not a significant issue in this study.

[Table 2 here]



Structured equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses, commencing with hypotheses 1 to 3, which examine the direct relationship between servant leadership and the three dimensions of commitment. Only hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported, i.e., a strong positive relationship was established between servant leadership and both affective ( $\beta=.36$   $p<0.01$ ) and normative commitment ( $\beta=.38$   $p<0.01$ ). In contrast, no support was found for hypothesis 3, i.e. there was no evidence of a significant relationship between servant leadership and continuance commitment (see figure 1). From the control variables only pay satisfaction and organizational level were found to be positively related to affective and normative commitment. Pay satisfaction was positively related to affective commitment ( $\beta=.26$   $p<0.01$ ) and normative commitment ( $\beta=.21$   $p<0.01$ ). Organizational level was positively related to affective commitment ( $\beta=.20$   $p<0.01$ ) and normative commitment ( $\beta=.23$   $p<0.01$ ), but negatively related to continuance commitment ( $\beta=-.22$   $p<0.01$ ). For reasons of model parsimony we left non-significant control variables out of the analysis. The removal of these control variables had no influence on the significance of the other paths in the model. The fit indices for the direct effects model indicate reasonable fit to the data ( $X^2= 2433.86$ ,  $df= 1016$ ,  $RMSEA=0.08$ ,  $IFI=0.97$ ,  $CFI=0.97$ ).

[Figure 1 here]

In order to test the mediation hypotheses, hypotheses 4 to 6, a series of structural models were carried out using LISREL 8.80 based on the recommendations of Baron and Kenny (1986). As a direct relationship between servant leadership and continuance commitment was not found in our initial analysis, hypothesis 6 was not tested in line with Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendations. Although Preacher and Hayes (2008) argue that even in the absence of direct

effects indirect effects may be present, subsequent SEM analysis did not establish a significant relationship between both dimensions of trust and continuance commitment, and bootstrapping analysis confirmed the absence of significant indirect effects through the two mediators, justifying our decision not to test hypothesis 6.

To test the mediating effects of affective and cognitive trust on the relationship between servant leadership and both affective and normative commitment (hypotheses 4 and 5), two models were examined, a full and partial mediation model. Model 1, a full mediation model, included paths from servant leadership to the trust mediators and from the trust mediators to affective and normative commitment. Model 2, a partial mediation model, was identical to model 1 with the exception that direct paths were included from servant leadership to affective and normative commitment. As for the model which tested for direct effects, only two of the control variables, pay satisfaction and organizational level, were found to be positively related to affective and normative commitment and included in both the full and partial mediation models.

Table 3 presents the fit statistics and table 4 shows the standardized path coefficients for both models.

[Table 3 here]

[Table 4 here]

When model 1, the full mediation model, was run, significant path coefficients resulted from servant leadership to affective trust ( $\beta=.87$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), from affective trust to affective commitment ( $\beta=.40$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) as well as from affective trust to normative commitment ( $\beta=.25$ ,

$p < 0.01$ ). Albeit the path coefficient between servant leadership and cognitive trust was significant ( $\beta = .79$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), the path from cognitive trust to affective commitment was insignificant, and that from cognitive trust to normative commitment ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was weaker than that from affective trust to normative commitment ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This is supportive of hypotheses 4 and 5 that affective trust more strongly mediates the impact of servant leadership on affective and normative commitment than cognitive trust. As for the control variables, pay satisfaction was positively related to affective ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and normative commitment ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and position was positively related to affective ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and normative commitment ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In table 3, the fit indices for model 1 indicate that the full mediation model fitted the data reasonably well ( $X^2 = 1979.18$ ,  $df = 767$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.08$ ,  $IFI = 0.97$ ,  $CFI = 0.97$ ).

Following this, model 2, the partial mediation model, was run. Neither of the direct paths added from servant leadership to affective and normative commitment were significant. As reported in table 3, the chi-squared for model 1 ( $X^2 = 1979.18$ ,  $df = 767$ ) was larger than that for model 2 ( $X^2 = 1978.54$ ,  $df = 765$ ), though not significantly ( $\Delta X^2 = 0.64$ ,  $\Delta df = 2$ , ns). As the addition of direct paths in model 2, the partial mediation model, did not improve fit over model 1, the full mediation model, the latter was accepted as the better model. Figure 2 presents graphically the results of model 1.

[Figure 2 here]

Finally, bootstrapping was used in order to provide more conclusive evidence of the indirect effects of servant leadership on affective and normative commitment through affective

and cognitive trust. The results are presented in table 5. We found that the indirect effects of servant leadership on follower affective and normative commitment through affective trust were significant. However, the indirect effects of servant leadership on both affective and normative commitment through cognitive trust were not significant. This lends support for hypotheses 4 and 5.

[Table 5 here]

## **Conclusion**

### **Empirical and theoretical contribution**

The contribution of this article was to shed light on the relationship among servant leadership, commitment and trust. We analyzed whether servant leadership can be utilized in the Chinese public sector to engender higher levels of organizational commitment and generate a better understanding of the trust-based mechanisms by which servant leadership weaves its influence on organizational commitment. We show that servant leadership strongly enhances affective and normative commitment through the development of affective trust rather than cognitive trust. This demonstrates the salience of social exchange theory in explaining why servant leadership induces higher levels of organizational commitment. Higher levels of job security in the Chinese public sector than elsewhere and the relationship-based Confucian culture serve to explain why affective and not cognitive trust acts as a mechanism by which servant leadership translates into higher levels of affective and normative commitment.

The fact that servant leadership leads to an increase in these commitment types has important implications. Higher commitment has been linked in the past to positive work attitudes such as higher job involvement and job satisfaction (Mathieu and Zajac 1990), as well as positive

performance and behavioral outcomes such as lower absenteeism (Angle and Perry 1981), lower turnover (Mowday *et al.* 1982), and improved productivity and performance (Meyer *et al.* 2002; Vandenberg 2009). Understanding how organizational commitment can be enhanced through servant leadership is particularly important given the limited success that pay-for-performance programs had in China in the past to increase commitment among civil servants. The Civil Service Law that took effect in 2006, replacing the 1993 Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants, sought to encourage high performance by increasing the percentage of civil servants who can obtain an “excellent” rating in the annual appraisals from 10 per cent to 20 per cent (Liu and Dong 2012). The new law also added a fourth category (almost competent) to the previous three-level assessment (excellent, competent, and incompetent). In the past, supervisors had hardly ever used the “incompetent” category. While the revised appraisal system was intended to better determine merit-based rewards, in practice it has had little impact. Chinese supervisors often continue to periodically rotate additional funds among their subordinates to maintain equality – reducing any pay differential and extrinsic incentive for high performance in the long run (Liu and Tang 2011). Therefore, a leadership style that nurtures the potential of subordinates may be more appropriate to increase commitment.

It can be expected that the beneficiaries of servant leadership are not only the organization (having more committed employees) and subordinates (having a supervisor who nurtures their potential) but also the servant leaders themselves. The Civil Servant Law introduced the so-called democratic appraisal system, in which all managers in charge of departments and above at the local level and all bureau chief deputies and above at the State Council are evaluated each year anonymously by all employees within the department (Liu and Dong 2012). The good relationship that servant leaders establish with their subordinates can be

expected to lead to high performance appraisals, enhancing the career potential of supervisors as well.

### **Normative implications and recommendations**

The Chinese national human resource development strategy stipulates that all civil servants above the level of division chief participate in a three-month training program within each five-year period (Xue and Liou 2012). We suggest incorporating elements that foster servant leadership behaviors, such as helping their subordinates to develop themselves irrespective of the organization's needs, into the new leader development programs. Moreover, supervisors might be recruited and selected based on their servant leadership behavior.

Having more committed subordinates who trust their supervisors is essential for public sector organizations. The decreasing levels of political trust that governments face around the world cannot be expected to reverse if the civil servants themselves distrust the supervisors who represent their organizations. As interpersonal trust in public officials can be transformed into institutional trustworthiness in government at large (Levi and Stoker 2000) servant leadership behavior may be a mechanism that can establish higher levels of political trust. This has important consequences as it facilitates the citizenry's compliance with governmental demands and encourages, for example, adequate disclosure of relevant personal information (Kim 2005). Servant-minded public sector employees may help to prevent social unrest and create the legitimacy that is crucial for the Communist Party to retain its absolute power.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

Analyzing data obtained from Chinese public sector employees, we show a positive influence of servant leadership on affective and normative commitment through affective trust in

supervisor. Despite this, our findings are subject to a number of limitations. Firstly, although care was taken to reduce common method bias in designing the study and carrying out data analysis, common method bias cannot be completely ruled out due to the use of self-report data from a single set of respondents. Subsequent research may encompass supervisor-rated measures of work outcomes in order to address this problem. Secondly, our research was conducted in one relatively affluent Chinese province. Civil servants in less developed areas may respond differently to the servant leaders' efforts to nurture their broader potential. Thirdly, given that we measured trust and commitment only two weeks apart we cannot completely rule out reverse causality, i.e., that commitment might actually lead to higher levels of trust. Future research may measure these variables at several points in time in a longitudinal panel design to conclusively determine causation.

Future research might also explore the influence that servant leaders have on PSM. This would entail measuring not only the degree to which servant leaders exhibit PSM characteristics, but also the extent to which they influence the climate of PSM and PSM-related behaviors within their group or organization. While research has been done on the relationship between transformational leadership practices and PSM (Kroll and Vogel 2013; Park and Rainey 2007; Ritz *et al.* 2009), the links between servant leadership and PSM have not yet been thoroughly investigated.

Finally, research should be conducted about how organizations can safeguard against the potential dark side of servant leadership, i.e., that servant leaders may be tempted to favor their subordinates at the expense of their organization. It also needs to be examined whether there are diminishing returns to servant leadership, i.e., whether exhibiting servant leadership

characteristics provides benefits only up to a certain degree in terms of employee performance and behavioral outcomes.



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