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NOT SO LONELY AT THE TOP?

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE MULTIPLE
COMMITMENTS OF ASPIRING LEADERS

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“Leadership is the other side of the coin of loneliness...”

Ferdinand Edralin Marcos, Sept. 14, 1966

Leadership is often viewed as a lonely endeavor, as this quote exemplifies. Leaders are frequently perceived as standing “alone” at the top of the hierarchy. Drive and sustained commitment have been linked to the attainment of leadership positions (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982), findings that are corroborated by the many public and private sector leaders who have described the years of intense work, perseverance, and sacrifice that led to their success. Traveling the path to career success and leadership positions can come at the expense of developing rewarding relationships with friends and family (e.g., Hewlett, 2002).

Despite the portrayal of leaders as sacrificing interpersonal relationships, it stands to reason that they, like other professional adults, are simultaneously committed to developing and maintaining relationships with their friends and family (interpersonal goals) as well as to developing and maintaining leadership roles in their professional endeavors (leadership goals). To date, however, there has been little direct empirical study of how commitment to leadership goals and commitment to interpersonal goals intersect for leaders, and whether certain characteristics, such as leaders’ gender or the sector in which they operate, affect the nature of the interaction.

In this paper we describe an exploratory study investigating the extent to which aspiring leaders—individuals who have demonstrated past leadership and who have indicated their intention to attain leadership positions in the future—adopt an integrative approach to professional success (i.e., are committed to pursuing multiple goals) or subscribe to common notions of leadership coming at the expense of other pursuits. This research augments current work on multiple commitments (e.g., Pittinsky, 2001). It adds a unique perspective by focusing on those who are poised to become leaders in private industry or public service, rather than assessing the commitment patterns, goals, and behaviors of those who have already attained their positions of leadership.

There are many ways to define leadership, and many models one might use to explore the interface between leadership and interpersonal goals. In our research we operationalize leadership as the attainment of positions of formal authority in organizations and society (Weber, 1978). Because our particular focus is to understand aspiring leaders, we focus on individuals very likely to hold positions of authority within organizations and society. The top-rated schools attended by our research samples emphasize the development of the skills, behaviors, and characteristics that contribute to effective leadership behavior. However, the venue through which their leadership skills are expressed is in the formal positions of authority that they attain upon entering the workplace. Coursework and other educational opportunities are designed to teach critical leadership skills, but the goal of these aspiring leaders is to attain positions of authority that allow them to exercise what they have learned. We acknowledge as well that leadership can be exercised in multiple domains—at work, and in the context of one’s personal life. In this study “leadership” commitment is constricted to work, and “interpersonal” commitment to non-work arenas.

MULTIPLE COMMITMENTS AND CAREERS

Because of the lack of direct research on commitment to leadership and career goals, we review the broader literature on multiple commitments as they relate to careers. We then consider the particular case of leadership and interpersonal goals.

Lay people and researchers often cast commitments to multiple foci as a zero-sum game; commitment to one will undermine commitment to another. Much of the research on multiple role commitments conducted in the domain of work-life balance, for example, investigated the negative effects that commitment in one domain (work or non-work) has on the other domain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Following a scarcity hypothesis, researchers in this domain have focused on the distribution of limited time, cognitive, and physical resources across work and family commitments (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991; Small & Riley, 1990). Increased conflict translates to more stress for the employee (Judge & Colquitt, 2004; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964). As summarized by a recent meta-analysis on the topic of family-to-work and work-to-family conflict:

Workers facing high levels of work/family conflict are at increased physical health risk, have less satisfactory job performance, poorer parental performance, more incidences of work withdrawal behaviors (e.g., tardiness, absenteeism, turnover, and low job involvement), decreased morale, and lower satisfaction with job, life, marriage, and family (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005).

The intensity of this conflict and its ramifications for workers' health, family, and job performance have been attributed to the strength of employees' commitment to both work and family. Thus, the more salient one's work role (Noor, 2004), and the more family responsibilities one has at home (Wiersma & Van den Berg, 1991), the greater the experienced conflict.

Much of the discussion of multiple commitments and careers, particularly with regard to work and family commitments, has focused on sex differences. In part because of gender role prescriptions, women have historically shouldered a larger portion of family responsibilities even when they also have demanding work roles. Thus, work-life conflict is an especially acute experience for women (Blau, Ferber & Winkler, 1998; Powell & Mainiero, 1992).

Several recent studies demonstrate the complexity of managing work and family commitments for men and women. Data collected by Tenbrunsel and colleagues, for example, indicated that while male employees seemed to be trading off involvement in their family for involvement in work, and vice versa, women's involvement with family was constant (Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh & Reilly, 1995). Rothbard and Edwards (2003) conducted a study of university employees showing that time investment in the family came at the expense of time invested at work for women, but not for men. However, both men's and women's involvement in work came at the expense of time with the family. Finally, Martins and colleagues showed that the effects of work-family conflict on career satisfaction of men and women are different for different age groups. Conflict between the two commitments was negatively correlated with career satisfaction for women in all age groups, but it only correlated negatively for men in the oldest age group (Martins, Eddleston & Veiga, 2002).

These studies did not explicitly focus on commitment to the domains of work and family, but rather on involvement, investment, and conflict. To the extent that investments of time and energy reflect commitment to these roles, however, there are implications for the current research. These findings suggest that simultaneous commitments to work and family engender conflict, but that men seem to experience more flexibility than women in focusing on one role over another.

“Lay people and researchers often cast commitments to multiple foci as a zero-sum game; commitment to one will undermine commitment to another.”

The Benefits of Multiple Commitments

The research described above is based on the assumption that multiple role commitments are inherently conflicting: That the feedback from one role to another must be negative. In contrast to the traditional focus on competing commitments, there is an emerging school of thought that multiple goal commitments do not necessarily conflict with one another. That is, one can be committed to his or her career while simultaneously pursuing “life” or non-work goals, and that the effects of one role on the other will not always be negative. Ruderman and colleagues’ (Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer & King, 2002) recent study demonstrates the utility of this approach for our understanding of working women’s experiences. They conducted a study of women managers’ commitments to a variety of non-work roles. Results of a survey indicated that the more strongly these women report having multiple life-role commitments (e.g., agreed with such statements as, “I expect to be active in volunteer organizations,” and “I expect to commit whatever time is necessary to developing close relationships with one or more people I feel similar to and am comfortable being with”) the more positive were their reports of personal well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, self-esteem) and professional skills. In contrast to what one may have predicted based on the work-life conflict literature, these women’s commitment to occupational roles did not significantly impact life satisfaction, self-esteem, or self-acceptance, nor were occupational role commitment and life role commitment significantly negatively correlated with each other. In other words, this study showed that having strong commitments to work and non-work roles do not always negatively interact.

Other research has examined the ramifications of having multiple work-related commitments, but has not considered the simultaneous pursuit of relationship or life-role commitments. Baugh and Roberts (1994, reported in Meyer & Allen, 1997) found that the concurrent commitment to both an organization and a career was a desirable mix. Their study revealed a marginally significant interaction between organizational commitment and professional commitment on overall job performance. The highest performers were those workers who had a strong commitment to both their organization and their engineering profession. The lowest performers were those workers with a weak commitment to their organization but a strong commitment to their profession. Similarly, researchers of unions have examined workers’ simultaneous commitment to their unions and their organizations (e.g., Walker & Lawler, 1979). Few of these studies support the common zero-sum characterization of multiple commitments. In fact, most have reported positive correlations (Gordon & Ladd, 1990; Wallace, 1993).

Together, these studies suggest that the commonly held belief that multiple commitments are incompatible in the domain of work is not always true. There are instances when people can commit simultaneously, and with equal fervor, to multiple goals.

Leaders’ Commitments

Despite the growing body of literature on multiple commitments, we know little about leadership goals—the commitment to being a leader in one’s professional endeavors±—as a distinct and meaningful commitment on the part of aspiring business leaders and public servants, and whether such commitments are viewed by leaders as incompatible with their other life commitments. The classical view of adult development, as illustrated in Levinson’s (1977) seminal work, corroborates the view that leadership and “life” commitments are frequently conflicting. Levinson found that these commitments were difficult for his cohort of successful men to attain in equal measure. His research sample noted the challenges they faced forging interpersonal connections at the same time that they were achieving career success.

While Levinson's work suggests that leadership and interpersonal commitments are difficult to simultaneously pursue, research on attachment styles show that there is a potential benefit to leaders who focus on having rich interpersonal relationships with friends and family (see, for example, Johnston, 2000; Manning, 2001; Popper, Maysless & Castelnovo, 2000; Sumer & Knight, 2001; Toepfer, 1996; Vasquez, Durik & Hyde, 2002). A series of studies by Popper and colleagues (2000) exemplifies this research. Their work is focused on people who demonstrate transformational leadership skills—that is, empowering, inspiring, and encouraging followers to perform above their expectations. The findings show that those with a secure attachment style are more likely to be transformational leaders than those with fearful, preoccupied, or dismissing attachment styles. In contrast to those with other types of attachment styles, secure individuals describe themselves as emotionally close to others, feel accepted by others, and rely on other people. This research suggests that having rich relationships with others can have a beneficial impact on leadership ability.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The current study adopts a unique perspective on multiple commitments. Rather than focusing on the commitment patterns of current leaders, which undoubtedly reflect years of making tradeoffs, balancing behaviors, and resolving conflicts between competing priorities, we are interested in the strength of aspiring leaders' commitments as they embark on their professional careers. This perspective allows us to see how the goal to be a leader is construed relative to personal goals: Are they viewed to be conflicting or compatible? Focusing on aspiring leaders thus will allow for insight into the sometimes contradictory findings of the multiple commitments literature. In addition, because the details of what constitutes commitment to each of these domains—interpersonal and leadership—are not well-specified, and indeed might well vary from one person to the next, we adopted a broad perspective in our work. That is, we allowed participants to define commitment to leadership and interpersonal domains in the manner of their own choosing.

We test competing hypotheses in this paper. Popular associations between leadership and sacrifice would lead us to suspect that aspiring leaders will express an inverse relationship between their leadership and interpersonal goals. This hypothesis is congruent with the findings from the commitment literature, which shows that high commitment in one arena is generally associated with low commitment in another.

Hypothesis 1: The more committed participants are to one goal, leadership or interpersonal, the less committed they will be to the other.

The competing hypothesis is based on the emerging literature demonstrating the benefits of multiple role commitments. That is, being committed to interpersonal goals can positively affect leadership experiences and therefore commitment to leadership goals, and vice versa.

Alternative Hypothesis 1: The more committed participants are to one goal, leadership or interpersonal, the more committed they will be to the other.

“Rather than focusing on the commitment patterns of current leaders, we are interested in the strength of aspiring leaders' commitments as they embark on their professional careers.”

We are interested in the goal commitments of men as compared to the goal commitments of women. Recent studies from Catalyst show that the majority of managerial women participants from financial services firms (2001) and law firms (2001a) indicated that commitment to personal and family responsibilities inhibited women from ascending to senior leadership ranks at the same rate as men. Coupled with the literature reviewed above, which suggests that women have a harder time than men achieving a balance between their work and personal lives, we suspect that women will believe even more strongly than men that life commitments and leadership commitments operate in opposition.

Hypothesis 2: Women participants will exhibit a stronger negative correlation between their goal commitments than will men participants.

In this study we also compare the perspectives of aspiring leaders in the private and public sectors. To our knowledge, there is no formal research comparing the nature of leadership responsibilities in these two realms, but we had the opportunity in this work to explore potential differences between aspiring leaders in each realm. Conventional wisdom suggests that being committed to both goals will be more difficult for those pursuing leadership in the private sector. As business has become increasingly global, the hours of work have expanded from the traditional “9 to 5.” In contrast, the hours of work in the government and nonprofit worlds are characterized as time-bounded. Public sector employees are commonly stereotyped as more bureaucratic and less hard-working than their counterparts in the private sector. Therefore, whatever the reality of public sector life, it may be perceived as exacting less interpersonal sacrifice than private sector work does.

We tested our assertions about the multiple commitments of aspiring leaders by surveying a representative sample of students pursuing either a Master of Business Administration (MBA) or a Master of Public Policy (MPP) in a top-ranked U.S. university.

METHOD

Participants

This study was conducted with students from a top-ranked business school and a top-ranked public administration school at a major United States university. Aspiring private sector leaders (business school MBA candidates, $n=138$) and public sector leaders (public administration school MPP candidates, $n=73$) were surveyed. Students from these programs provided an excellent sample with which to test our hypotheses for several reasons. The business school from which participants were recruited is ranked in the top 5 of U.S. business schools. The application for admission contains several questions through which leadership experiences are assessed: membership in organized groups and the position held; an essay about career aspirations; an essay about their personal leadership experiences. This school explicitly recruits individuals who are motivated to become formal leaders in organizations: its official mission is to “develop outstanding business leaders.” Historical data show that 97% of the alumni of this MBA program do indeed go on to work in the private sector.

Similarly, the MPP-granting institution was ranked within the top 5 of U.S. Public Affairs and Public Policy schools. The institution explicitly selects students with prior leadership experience and the aspiration to attain positions of formal leadership in the public sector. The mission of the school includes the “training of talented leaders,” and the application materials include several measures of leadership potential. These include an essay question requiring students to describe an event or experience in which they

exercised leadership, and a detailed description of their career objectives. In 2004, 76% of the graduating MPP students entered employment in the public sector after graduation.

Of the 138 MBA students who completed our survey, 70% were male and 30% female¹, 55% were U.S. citizens, and their average age was 27 years old. Of the 73 MPP student participants, 49% were male and 51% female, 83% were U.S. citizens, and the average age was 28 years old.

In an effort to secure the most random sample and, therefore, the most highly representative of the overall student population, we collected data from public spaces that serve as meeting points for students in the MBA and MPP programs. Students were solicited for participation in the dining hall and other high-traffic common areas of each school. A table was set up and staffed by a researcher, who asked students to fill out a short survey. As an incentive, all participants were entered into a raffle for a gift certificate for a local restaurant. The demographics of our survey sample closely matched the statistics for the schools overall, indicating that we succeeded in obtaining a largely representative sample.

Measures

Independent Variables: As discussed above, there were two independent variables in this study: participant gender and sector of interest (public or private sector). Information about gender was obtained through an open-ended question on the survey asking participants to indicate their gender. As described in detail above, aspiring private sector leaders were recruited from the business school and aspiring public sector leaders from the school of public administration at the same university.

Dependent Measures: Surveys, administered as part of a larger study on leadership, included two questions important to this research. Participants were asked to use a seven-point scale, anchored with 1=extremely uncommitted and 7=extremely committed, to rate “How committed are you to achieving each of the following?”: “interpersonal goals (i.e., your relations with friends and family),” and “personal leadership goals.” In addition, several demographic questions were asked, such as gender, age, and country of citizenship.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and cell sizes are presented in Table 1. Our first set of analyses were exploratory, conducted to understand participants’ commitment to interpersonal and leadership goals. Basic questions were answered, such as: Are participants more committed to leadership or interpersonal goals? Do men and women show differing levels of commitment to each goal? How about those aspiring to public vs. private-sector leadership? Following these analyses, we tested our research hypotheses.

Exploratory Analyses

1. Relative Commitment to Interpersonal and Leadership Goals

In our first analysis, we examined the relative commitment to interpersonal and leadership goals by conducting a series of paired-sample t-tests. In the private sector, both men and women expressed stronger commitment to achieving their interpersonal goals than leadership goals: for male MBAs, $t(95) = 3.55$, $p < .01$, and for female MBAs, $t(41) = 3.77$, $p < .01$. However, among the public sector participants, only women indicated stronger commitment to interpersonal goals, $t(36) = 3.71$, $p < .01$; for men, there was no significant difference between commitment to interpersonal goals and to leadership goals, $t(35) = 1.45$.

TABLE 1 MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CELL SIZES OF DEPENDENT MEASURES BY SECTOR AND GENDER

	INTERPERSONAL GOALS	LEADERSHIP GOALS
PRIVATE SECTOR		
Men	6.34 (1.04) _a n=96	6.05 (1.02) _b n=97
Women	6.39 (1.00) _a n=41	5.95 (.97) _b n=41
PUBLIC SECTOR		
Men	5.86 (.99) _a n=36	5.56 (1.16) _a n=36
Women	6.53 (.76) _a n=37	5.76 (1.01) _b n=37

Note: Different subscripts within a row indicate a significant difference in means, $p < .01$.

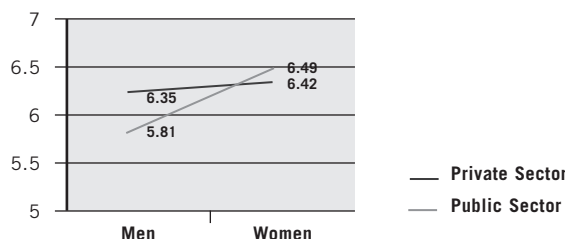
“In fact, public sector men were significantly less likely than participants from any other group to express commitment to achieving interpersonal goals.”

2. Commitment to Interpersonal Goals

Our categorical independent variables and continuous dependent measures made ANOVA the ideal tool for analyzing our results. Thus, a 2 x 2 univariate ANOVA was conducted to determine whether commitment to interpersonal goals varied by gender and/or sector. Because of the differences between the two samples in country of citizenship (there was a smaller proportion of U.S. citizens in the MBA sample), this variable was entered as a covariate.²

Results revealed a significant main effect for gender, $F(1,204) = 6.34, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, and an interaction between gender and sector, $F(1,204) = 4.34, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$. To clarify these effects, LSD post-hoc tests were conducted on the estimated marginal means. While there was little difference between men’s and women’s commitment to interpersonal goals in the private sector, women preparing to enter the public sector expressed significantly greater commitment to interpersonal goals than did their male colleagues. In fact, public sector men were significantly less likely than participants from any other group to express commitment to achieving interpersonal goals. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction using the estimated marginal means.

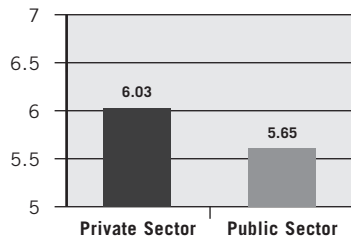
FIGURE 1 COMMITMENT TO INTERPERSONAL GOALS BY SECTOR AND GENDER



3. Commitment to Leadership Goals

Again, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was conducted. Results revealed a significant main effect for sector, $F(1,205) = 5.81$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$, such that aspiring leaders in the public sector expressed less commitment to their personal leadership goals than aspiring leaders in private sector. Figure 2 illustrates this main effect using the estimated marginal means.

FIGURE 2 COMMITMENT TO LEADERSHIP GOALS BY SECTOR



Tests of Hypotheses

Our first hypotheses explored the relationship between interpersonal and leadership commitments. The second hypothesis stated that women would have a stronger negative correlation between goal commitments than men would. Finally, we explored the possibility that those aspiring to leadership in the private sector will have a stronger negative correlation between goal commitments than those in the private sector.

To test these hypotheses, we computed correlations between leadership and interpersonal commitment separately for men and women in each sector, controlling for citizenship. In other words, we created four categories of participants: men MPPs & men MBAs; and women MPPs and women MBAs. We then calculated each group's correlation between goal commitments (controlling for citizenship) and tested for the significance of the differences between the magnitudes of the correlations.

Our overall results revealed a picture quite different from what traditional notions of leadership and interpersonal sacrifice would lead us to expect. As can be seen in Table 2, there was an overall tendency for participants' goal commitments to be positively related to each other, not inversely related as the "leaders must sacrifice" hypothesis predicts. Our second hypothesis was only partially supported. Men and women did not, overall, have significantly different correlations between leadership and interpersonal commitments. The only group for whom the correlation between their interpersonal and leadership goals was not significant and positive was public sector women. Their correlation was significantly lower than those demonstrated by all of the other groups in the study. Even so, this relationship was not significantly negative, indicating no evidence for a perceived tradeoff even amongst public sector women between interpersonal and leadership goal commitments.

Finally, there was little support for our speculation that aspiring private sector leaders would perceive more of a tradeoff than aspiring public sector leaders. Both groups demonstrated an overall positive correlation between goal commitments. Surprisingly, the magnitude of the correlation was larger for MBA than MPP students (.67 vs. .25). Looking at men and women separately, we see that aspiring public-sector women leaders demonstrated a less positive correlation between goal commitments than their MBA counterparts, but this was not reflected in men's ratings (differences between correlations were not significant).

TABLE 2 GENDER AND SECTOR DIFFERENCES IN COMMITMENT CORRELATIONS, CONTROLLING FOR CITIZENSHIP

LEADERSHIP GOALS	INTERPERSONAL GOALS	
	Private Sector, overall	
	Men	.66**
	Women	.70**
	Public Sector, overall	.25*
	Men	.44**
	Women	-.03

** p < .01

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study provides a first glimpse into the commitment patterns of aspiring leaders—those who are poised to take on formal leadership roles in organizations and society. This complements the more typical focus on those who are currently leaders. By studying aspiring leaders, we illuminate early thought patterns that may influence their subsequent choices.

While the role of “leader” has traditionally been seen as requiring significant interpersonal and relationship sacrifices, this study suggests that our cohort of aspiring leaders does not hold these traditional views. Overall, students in both the MBA and the MPP programs expressed strong commitment to both leadership and interpersonal goals; on a seven-point measurement scale, the averages for all groups on goal commitment only ranged between a low of 5.56 and a high of 6.53. The surprising finding lies not with their commitment to the leadership goal—these were individuals selected in part for their demonstrated commitment to leadership—but in their concurrent commitment to achieving interpersonal goals. These individuals appear unwilling to make interpersonal sacrifices on their path to career success. With the exception of public sector men, all participant groups demonstrated a significantly stronger commitment to interpersonal goals than to leadership goals. Thus, relationships with friends and family are held to be at least as important as attaining leadership goals, if not more so.

The lack of unwillingness to commit to one goal over the other is further demonstrated through the positive correlations uncovered between commitments to interpersonal and leadership goals among the men and women MBA participants, as well as men MPP participants. In stark contrast to the notion of a “tradeoff,” the more strongly committed they were to one goal, the more strongly committed they were to the other. These positive correlations suggest not only that aspiring leaders do not perceive a tradeoff, but also that there may be a perceived synergy between the two goals that allows for mutual reinforcement of goal attainment. The one group for whom this relationship was not significantly and positively correlated—MPP women—also did not exhibit responses consistent with the tradeoff perspective.

There are several possible explanations for these surprising findings. The first is simply that aspiring leaders view the characterization of leadership as requiring sacrifices in time spent with friends and family as myth, not reality. Extending this explanation to account for the strong positive correlations between interpersonal and leadership commitments, it is possible that aspiring leaders expect beneficial spillover

from each of their two commitments. Thus, devoting time and resources to pursuing leadership endeavors may be viewed as enriching interpersonal relationships, and vice versa. This contrasts with the traditional spillover research, which focuses on the negative spillover of work demands into time spent with family, and the negative effects of family obligations on work experiences (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), but is consistent with findings reported by Ruderman, et al. (2002) showing that managerial women who are strongly committed to multiple life commitments demonstrate higher levels of psychological well-being than those who are not.

Second, it is possible that students who are strongly committed to becoming leaders in their sector are mindful of the sacrifices that are in store for them, have identified their interpersonal goals, and have developed a plan and the commitment to seeing the goals realized. In this way, the common notion of leadership as a lonely path may inspire individuals motivated from the outset of their careers to becoming leaders to create room for other important life goals and remain committed to achieving them.

Third, we may surmise that our data do not entirely discount the possibility of a tradeoff between leadership and interpersonal activities. That is, those individuals who are strongly committed to becoming leaders in their sector may have interpersonal goals that are less ambitious than those who are less motivated to become leaders. Perhaps they anticipate spending less time with family and friends. However, because of the tradeoff in time spent in the interpersonal domain, the actual commitment to achieving this goal is higher. These aspiring leaders may be less willing to make further sacrifices of their interpersonal goals because they have already sacrificed them to some extent in advance. Unfortunately, we were unable to collect data on these individuals' goals in this study, but future research in this domain would benefit from accounting for participants' frame of reference when answering the questions—understanding what their professed levels of commitment entail in regard to activities, behaviors, and goals with respect to leadership and interpersonal endeavors.

There may also be a generational explanation for these findings. The commitments of today's aspiring leaders may be different from the commitments of aspiring leaders a generation ago. Bennis and Thomas (2002) report that a commitment to balancing work and personal life is one of the most notable characteristics of younger leaders, compared to their counterparts of previous generations.

“Aspiring leaders in the public sector demonstrated less commitment to leadership goals than did those in the private sector.”

It is important to note that our results were not uniform across all the groups we surveyed. Gender differences emerged amongst the public service aspiring leaders; women in that sector demonstrated more commitment to interpersonal goals than men. However, it is equally important to note the strong commitment that each group demonstrated. Both were close to the extreme point of the response scale. In addition, aspiring women leaders in the public sector demonstrated no significant correlation between their goal commitments. With existing literature, we cannot explain why their increased commitment to leadership goals was not accompanied by an increase in commitment to interpersonal goals, as was found with the other groups. However, the fact that the relationship was not significantly negative revealed that, even for this group, the tradeoff hypothesis did not hold.

There was one difference between the sectors that emerged from our data. Aspiring leaders in the public sector demonstrated less commitment to leadership goals than did those in the private sector. Again, the means were similar and positive, but the significant difference suggests that the demands of leadership in the two sectors may be different. Alternatively, the definition of leadership in public and private sectors may be differently construed, with public sector leadership perhaps more difficult to attain or envision. Future research is needed in order to shed more light on what lies behind these sector differences.

NEXT STEPS FOR OUR RESEARCH

This study was a first step in examining goal commitments of aspiring leaders. As a first study, it has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, we measured and studied the level of commitment to goals, but not the distinct ways in which each participant defines his or her interpersonal and leadership goals. The benefit of this approach is that we are able to directly compare across participants. A limitation of this approach is that it prevents us from understanding whether individuals with strong commitment to their leadership goals had qualitatively different goals than those with weaker commitment to their leadership goals. Our future research on goal commitments will systematically measure goal content as well as commitment in order to shed more light on possible interdependencies between the two. Adopting a qualitative research methodology in future work may provide just such insight and in-depth understanding of these issues and would complement the research and analyses reported here.

One of the strengths of our study—access to aspiring leaders in top-ranked institutions—also presents a limitation in our understanding of multiple goal commitments. These are clearly individuals who have thought about leadership, are learning about it in coursework, and are exposed to high-profile leaders in the classroom, at seminars, and through experience. This exposure may have prompted them to be very thoughtful about interpersonal goals and how to remain committed to them in the face of challenging careers. In our future work we are aiming to examine a cohort of individuals whose exposure to leadership role models and course curricula is not so extreme. Perhaps the hypothesized tradeoffs would be more evident among such a cohort. Related to these issues, it must be acknowledged that the aspiring leaders in our study—students—may be quite different from aspiring leaders who are “in the trenches.” Entry to mid-level managers who aspire to senior leadership positions, for instance, may deal with a different set of issues and challenges than the students in our sample. We therefore believe that aspiring leaders are not a homogeneous group – they can be at different levels and functions within their organizations, and can even be tapped before entering organizations, as we did in the current study.

Finally, our survey method gave us descriptive ability, but not causal insight. We do not know whether commitment to leadership goals leads to increased commitment to interpersonal goals, or vice versa. Similarly, we cannot rule out the possibility that there is simply a “committed” personality type: whatever the goal, they will always report strong commitment to it. While this research topic does not easily lend itself to laboratory study, it would greatly benefit from longitudinal or cross-sectional research. Ideally we would re-survey our study participants at later points in their career to assess whether, and how, their goal commitments change. Future research that observes changing commitment patterns over critical periods of leadership training and experience may reveal whether multiple commitments can be sustained, or whether our cohort of aspiring leaders will, too, be “lonely at the top.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 The disproportionately high representation of men in this study is typical of many business school student populations.
- 2 We did not have specific hypotheses based on students’ citizenship but wanted to ensure that cultural variations in the construal of leadership and interpersonal goals did not exert more influence over the MBA cohort than the MPP cohort. Including citizenship as a dichotomous variable (U.S. citizen/not a U.S. citizen) in the ANOVA allowed us to partial out the variance due to this factor and focus instead on the uncontaminated variance explained by the independent variables of interest.

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