

Servant Leadership and Employee Advocacy: The Mediating Role of Psychological Empowerment and Perceived Relationship Investment

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The current study examines how servant leadership relates with employee advocacy behaviors through the mediating role of psychological empowerment and perceived relationship investment (PRI). Through a quantitative survey with 357 employees who work for a variety of organizations in Chile, the study's results indicated that servant leadership plays a critical role in fostering psychological empowerment and PRI, which in turn encourage employee advocacy behaviors. Relevant theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: employee advocacy, psychological empowerment, perceived relationship investment, servant leadership

Both internal and external publics are increasingly expecting and demanding organizations and their leaders to act ethically and serve all stakeholders' needs. There is a growing demand for leaders who are committed to building relationships and "not motivated by self-interest and the pursuit of power" (Arkin, 2009, p. 27). Not surprisingly, servant leadership, which suggests that leaders should prioritize ethical behavior (Ehrhart, 2004) and the well-being of their followers, customers, and community over their self-interest (Greenleaf, 1970), has recently received increasing attention among scholars and organizations alike. As a result, "companies like Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, The Container Store, AFLAC, and 7-Eleven have all explicitly adopted core tenets of servant leadership either into their mission statements or in their fundamental business practices" (Kiker, Scully Callahan, & Kiker, 2019, pp. 172–173). Overall, servant leaders prioritize the realization of their followers' requirements and exemplify a "servant first" instead of a "leader first" mentality (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 13). Given a servant leader's altruistic behavior, developing others and helping them succeed will precede the interests of the leader and the organization (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

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Therefore, this type of leadership is essential in paving the way for organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs; Organ, 1997); these are employees' discretionary actions that contribute to organizational effectiveness, but are generally not included in formal job responsibilities (Janssen, 2000; Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014).

Employee advocacy, which has previously been described as a type of OCB (Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018) in which employees voluntarily promote or defend the organization (Men, 2014) to both internal and external publics (Thelen, 2020), has become an area of interest among communication practitioners. Its potential to increase awareness and, more important, growth, revenue, recruitment, and retention rates (e.g., Cervellon & Lirio, 2017; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001; Schmitt, Skiera, & Van den Bulte, 2011; Villanueva, Yoo, & Hanssens, 2008), has contributed to this growing attention. As a result, public relations scholars have begun to shed light on this topic by investigating some of its antecedents, including organizational culture, leadership communication, and organizational communication (e.g., Men, 2014; Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018).

Drawing from the previous literature, the current study seeks to expand the body of knowledge on employee advocacy by investigating the effect of servant leadership on employee advocacy through the mediating role of psychological empowerment (i.e., a state that enhances followers' perceptions that they have the capacity to influence their work roles and outcomes; Spreitzer, 1995) and perceived relationship investment (PRI; i.e., the perceptions employees have of their organization's relationship investment with them). Social exchange theory (SET), which pertains to obligations induced through interactions (Blau, 1964), provides a framework for understanding how servant leadership influences outcomes such as employee advocacy. More specifically, a supervisor's leadership behavior, and the development of an environment that empowers employees and increases their perception that their organization is invested in building relationships with them, can serve as emotional and cognitive resources that prompt employees to reciprocate by advocating on behalf of the organization. Thus, this study proposed and tested a model that links servant leadership, employees' psychological empowerment, PRI, and employee advocacy. In essence, we argued that when employees feel empowered because of their supervisor's servant leadership, their cognitive perceptions of the organization's interest in maintaining relationships with them will increase, and their willingness to promote and defend the organization may subsequently grow. The main contribution of this article is threefold. First, it contributes to a better understanding of the effectiveness of servant leadership. Second, it sheds more light on the specific mechanisms through which servant leadership can affect employee advocacy. Finally, the study focuses on the impact of servant leadership in Chile, a Latin American country in an understudied region of the world. Our findings corroborated the effectiveness of servant leadership in Chile.

Literature Review

The literature review will first define servant leadership and compare it with other leadership theories. It will then conceptualize psychological empowerment, PRI, and employee advocacy. The link of servant leadership with psychological empowerment, PRI, and employee advocacy will then be explored.

Servant Leadership

The term "servant leadership" was first explored in the literature by Robert Greenleaf (1970, 1977), who suggested that this leadership style "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13). Previous researchers have suggested that the teachings of Confucius and Jesus Christ, as well as the tribal leadership of the Bedouin-Arab culture, are similar and aligned in several ways with servant leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Winston & Ryan, 2008). More recently, figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr. have been described as exemplifying the characteristics of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970; Spears, 2004).

Unlike other leadership styles that place the organization's well-being as the ultimate goal, servant leadership focuses on satisfying the work needs of followers (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008). In other words, servant leaders "want their subordinates to improve for their own good, and view the development of followers as an end, in and of itself, not merely as a means to reach the leader's or organization's goals" (Ehrhart, 2004, p. 69). These leaders focus on their employees' growth and success (Greenleaf, 1977). As servant leaders concentrate on others, they are values-driven and bound by what is morally right (Sendjaya, 2015). Additionally, servant leaders' people-oriented philosophy helps them understand employees' unique capabilities and goals (Liden et al., 2008) and develop a robust and close-knit relationship between leaders and followers (van Dierendonck, 2011). As noted by Greenleaf (1977), a servant leader's effectiveness is established by answering the following questions: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p. 7).

Drawing from Greenleaf's conceptualizations, Spears (1995) was among the first to describe and operationalize a measure of servant leadership. In the following years, studies on servant leaders rapidly intensified. As a result, several other scholars identified additional characteristics of servant leadership (e.g., Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Farling, Stone, & Winston, 1999; Irving & Longbotham, 2007). This increasing interest led to the publication of 39 articles on servant leadership in management journals between 2004 and 2011 (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Capturing the full dimensionality of servant leadership has been a critical objective among researchers during the past few decades. However, recent studies have supported the reliability and validity of global, unidimensional measures of servant leadership (Liden et al., 2015). Given the rigorous methods employed in its development, scholars have frequently used a seven-dimension scale created by Liden and colleagues (2008). One limitation of this scale is its 28-item length. Because including many items can increase fatigue among respondents and negatively influence the quality of their responses, Liden and colleagues (2015) revisited the scale and turned it into a single dimension measure known as the SL-7. Every item in this scale represents each of the seven dimensions of the SL-28: (1) emotional healing, (2) creating value for the community, (3) conceptual skills, (4) empowering, (5) helping subordinates grow and succeed, (6) putting subordinates first, and (7) behaving ethically. As a result, the current study uses Liden and colleagues' (2015) SL-7.

Psychological Empowerment

More than three decades ago, Conger and Kanungo (1988) suggested that organizations psychologically empower employees when they generate favorable conditions for the development of self-

efficacy. Building on that work, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argued that empowerment is multifaceted and not fully captured by a single dimension. These authors defined psychological empowerment as an increased intrinsic task motivation that manifests itself through the following four cognitive dimensions: meaning in work, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning refers to the fit between an employee's values and the requirements of the job task (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Competence refers to the belief that employees have in their potential to perform work roles with proficiency (Spreitzer, 1995). Self-determination entails an employee's sense of autonomy and choice in the actions and decisions that he or she makes at work (Bell & Staw, 1989). Finally, impact refers to the level of influence an employee has on strategic, administrative, or operating work outcomes (Ashforth, 1989). These four cognitions reflect employees' active attitudes toward their work roles (Spreitzer, 1995). As noted by Spreitzer (1995), the absence of one of these four dimensions will decrease, but not entirely remove, an employee's perception of psychological empowerment. As empowerment reveals the perceptions that employees have of themselves in their work environment, it evolves and changes and does not represent an unchangeable personality trait or attribute that is applicable across a wide range of life situations (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Servant Leadership and Empowerment

Empirical studies have suggested that servant leadership is positively associated with a wide range of individual outcomes, such as self-efficacy (Liden et al., 2014), performance (Liden et al., 2014), job satisfaction (Mayer, Bardes, & Piccolo, 2008), organizational commitment (Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009; Liden et al., 2008), engagement (Carter & Baghurst, 2014), creative behaviors (Yoshida, Sendjaya, Hirst, & Cooper, 2014), innovative behaviors (Cai, Lysova, Khapova, & Bossink, 2018), positive psychological capital (Hsiao, Lee, & Chen, 2015), and OCB (Ehrhart, 2004; J. Hu & Liden, 2011). Although servant leaders are not primarily focused on organizational objectives, they empower their followers by focusing on their value and potential (Sendjaya & Pekerti, 2010), trusting their abilities to reason and dialogue (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004), and by making it easy for them to assume responsibilities (Liden et al., 2008). The level of safety generated by this type of leadership increases the likelihood of employees authentically expressing themselves instead of suppressing their thoughts and emotions (Rego, Reis Júnior, & Pina e Cunha, 2015).

By serving others first and encouraging their employees to display behaviors that are congruent with their beliefs (Sendjaya, 2015; van Dierendonck, 2011), servant leaders may strengthen employees' perceptions of the meaningfulness of their jobs (Newman, Schwarz, Cooper, & Sendjaya, 2017). Similarly, by supporting and encouraging employees to develop new skills and achieve their potential (van Dierendonck, 2011), servant leaders may also reinforce their followers' feelings of competence to perform their tasks successfully (Newman et al., 2017). Working in a supportive culture enhances employees' level of engagement and trust (Meng & Berger, 2019). In addition, servant leaders are responsible for inspiring followers to become independent thinkers, develop a sense of autonomy, and hold themselves accountable for future development (Liden et al., 2014). As a result of these characteristics, servant leaders could also play an essential role in developing self-determination among employees (van Dierendonck, 2011). Finally, as servant leaders inspire employees to take part in the decision-making process, they are also likely to

increase follower perceptions of the impact their work has on the organization (Newman et al., 2017). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Servant leadership is positively associated with psychological empowerment.

Perceived Relationship Investment (PRI)

Marketing scholars defined "perceived relationship investment" as

a consumer's perception of the extent to which a service provider devotes resources, efforts and attention aimed at maintaining or enhancing relationships with regular customers who do not have outside value and cannot be recovered if these relationships are terminated. (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001, p. 96)

Scholars have found that customers' cognitive perceptions of an organization's relational investment with them impact their perceived relationship quality (De Wulf et al., 2001; Sung & Kim, 2014; Yue, Chung, Kelleher, Bradshaw, & Ferguson, 2020). The principle of reciprocity, which relates to the proclivity that individuals have to return a favor in proportion to the one they received (Bagozzi, 1995), has been used to explain this relationship between PRI and relationship quality (De Wulf et al., 2001). Although public relations researchers have put forward several strategies to foster relationships (e.g., Ki & Hon, 2008), Cho and Auger (2013) have noted that the public's cognitive response to these organizational efforts has not been considered. As a result, the construct, which was used initially by marketing scholars, is currently being utilized in the strategic communication and public relations literature (e.g., Cho & Auger, 2013; Sung & Kim, 2014). The current study, which explores PRI in an internal communication setting, follows De Wulf and associates (2001) and defines this concept as an employee's perception of the extent to which an organization devotes resources, efforts, and attention aimed at building, maintaining, and enhancing relationships with employees.

Empowerment and PRI

When employees feel empowered, they tend to feel more significant levels of trust toward their superiors (Cheung, Baum, & Wong, 2012). Similarly, perceptions of managers' behavioral integrity, consistency, and benevolence are also likely to increase when employees feel empowered (Huang, 2012; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). On an organizational level, empowered employees have a stronger relationship with (Men & Stacks, 2013) and a more favorable view of their organization (Fombrun, 1996). Additionally, empowered employees believe that their employers have a stronger reputation (Men & Stacks, 2013). On the other hand, the lack of empowerment among employees can lead to perceptions of opacity regarding an organization's operations, which consequently lead to lower levels of trust (Kanagaretnam, Mestelman, Khalid Nainar, & Shehata, 2014). This study contends that psychological empowerment induces employees' cognition that their organization is making efforts to build and improve relationships with them. As psychological empowerment satisfies employees' innate needs for autonomy and competence (Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997), employees will be more likely to recognize and validate the relationship efforts initiated by their organization. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: *Psychological empowerment is positively related with PRI.*

Employee Advocacy

Employees' in-depth knowledge of the organization and regular interaction with various stakeholders make them valuable organizational advocates (Dortok, 2006; Shinnar, Young, & Meana, 2004). The natural question that arises, then, is, What is an employee advocate? Previous scholars have described advocacy as an employee's willingness to promote, recommend (Božac, Sušan, & Agušaj, 2017; Tsarenko, Leo, & Tse, 2018), and defend an organization to external publics (Men, 2014; Men & Yue, 2019; Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018). Thelen (2020) suggested that employee advocacy is not exclusively directed toward external publics; it also includes promoting and defending the organization internally to other employees. Furthermore, employee advocacy, which has been described as a type of OCB (Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018), also includes nonverbal communication (Jackson, n.d.). A recent exploratory study conducted by Thelen (2020) found that internal communicators perceive that the two most common forms of nonverbal advocacy behaviors are wearing company swag (e.g., shirts and caps) and engaging in community relations volunteer work. Hence, the current study uses Thelen's (2020) definition and describes employee advocacy as "a verbal (written and spoken) or nonverbal manifestation of support, recommendation, or defense of an organization or its products by an employee to either internal or external publics" (p. 8).

Empowerment, PRI, and Employee Advocacy

When employees recognize that their management empowers them, they are more likely to develop higher levels of organizational identification and view organizational values as their own (Erturk, 2010). As a result of this identification, employees are more likely to become reliable organizational contributors and engage in supportive and extra-role behaviors such as positive word of mouth (Kane, Magnusen, & Perrewé, 2012; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Managers and superiors who empower their subordinates distribute knowledge and information in a way that adequately nourishes them with the resources they need to make work-related decisions (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). Empowering employees in this manner increases their likelihood of becoming intrinsically motivated to partake in altruistic behaviors, such as sharing knowledge with others (Gagné, 2009). When employees feel empowered to share knowledge, they will likely feel a stronger inclination to, for example, share positive news about the organization and the work that they do with others.

Regarding PRI, previous studies have found that it has a positive impact on satisfaction, commitment, and overall perceptions of the quality of relationships (Baker, Simpson, & Siguaw, 1999; Bennett, 1996). Additionally, scholars have found that perceived organizational relationship investment influences behavioral loyalty (De Wulf et al., 2001). The psychological tie that develops when individuals acknowledge that another party is invested in building relationships with them motivates them to reciprocate as a way to maintain that relationship (Blau, 1964; Smith & Barclay, 1997). As a result, this study predicts that PRI has a positive relationship with employee advocacy behaviors. Given the expected relationship between PRI and employee advocacy, psychological empowerment could indirectly promote employee advocacy by shaping PRI. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Psychological empowerment is positively associated with employee advocacy.

H4: PRI is positively associated with employee advocacy.

H5: PRI partially mediates the effect of psychological empowerment on employee advocacy.

Servant Leadership, PRI, Empowerment, and Employee Advocacy

Previous studies have found that servant leadership positively influences employee engagement and loyalty (Carter & Baghurst, 2014). In part, this relationship can be explained by the fact that employees seek leaders who place time and effort in strengthening relationships in an attempt to generate trust, commitment, and loyalty (Rofcanin & Mehtap, 2010). PRI occurs when employees perceive organizational efforts to improve their ties and increase feelings of loyalty with their workers. PRI also increases when employees feel that their organization cares about keeping its employees. Given that employees frequently interact with their supervisors on a daily basis, employees' perception of their supervisors largely affects their impression of the organization. For instance, a study conducted by Jaramillo and colleagues (2009) found that servant leaders play a role in developing a climate that helps employees "feel a stronger sense of shared organizational values, become more committed to the firm, and thus express a deeper desire to stay" (p. 358). Similarly, Men and Stacks (2014) have found that employees are more likely to perceive a better relationship with the organization when their leaders are authentic, ethical, fair, and transparent. As a result, a relationship between servant leadership and PRI seems plausible.

H6: Servant leadership is positively associated with PRI.

The exchange relationship between employees and their organizations or supervisors can be classified as either economic or social (Blau, 1964). When ties are purely economic, employees will perform their tasks for specified monetary compensation. In social exchanges, employees also receive and benefit from socioemotional resources provided by their leaders and organizations. Quality organizational social exchanges portray investment, mutual trust, and a long-term orientation (Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, 2006). SET and the norm of reciprocity, which involve obligations that are developed through interdependent interactions (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976), suggest that employees are more likely to manifest extra-role behaviors when they recognize that their leader supports them and is concerned about their growth and development in the organization (Ehrhart, 2004). A number of studies have proposed that there is a positive relationship between servant leadership and extra-role behaviors (e.g., Bambale et al., 2015; Gucl & Begec, 2012; Rosnani, 2018). For example, a study conducted by Wang, Xu, and Liu (2018) found that servant leadership among supervisors predicted extra-role service performance among frontline employees. As a result, a positive relationship between servant leadership and employee advocacy is probable.

H7: Servant leadership is positively associated with employee advocacy.

Scholars have proposed that servant leaders can influence OCB through social exchange relationships characterized by the interchange of care and concern (van Dierendonck, 2011). A study conducted by Newman and colleagues (2017) found that leader-member exchange (LMX; i.e., the level of

emotional support and exchange of valuable resources that occurs between supervisors and their direct subordinates) mediated the relationship between servant leadership and OCB. As noted previously, servant leaders develop relationships with their followers and prioritize their growth and development (Greenleaf, 1977). As a result, this can generate higher levels of psychological empowerment and PRI. At the same time, this study predicts that psychological empowerment and PRI have a positive relationship with employee advocacy. Therefore, drawing on SET, this study proposes that both empowerment and PRI mediate the process through which servant leadership influences employee advocacy. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H8: PRI partially mediates the effect of servant leadership on employee advocacy.

H9: Psychological empowerment partially mediates the effect of servant leadership on employee advocacy.

Method

A quantitative online survey was conducted on Qualtrics to test the proposed model (Figure 1). In total, the present study sampled 357 full-time employees working across various industries in Chile. Dynata, the world's largest first-party data and insight platform, was used to recruit participants. The data collection lasted for 11 days in February 2020. To estimate how accurately the predictive model will perform in practice, the sample covered a wide range of organizations and business communities.

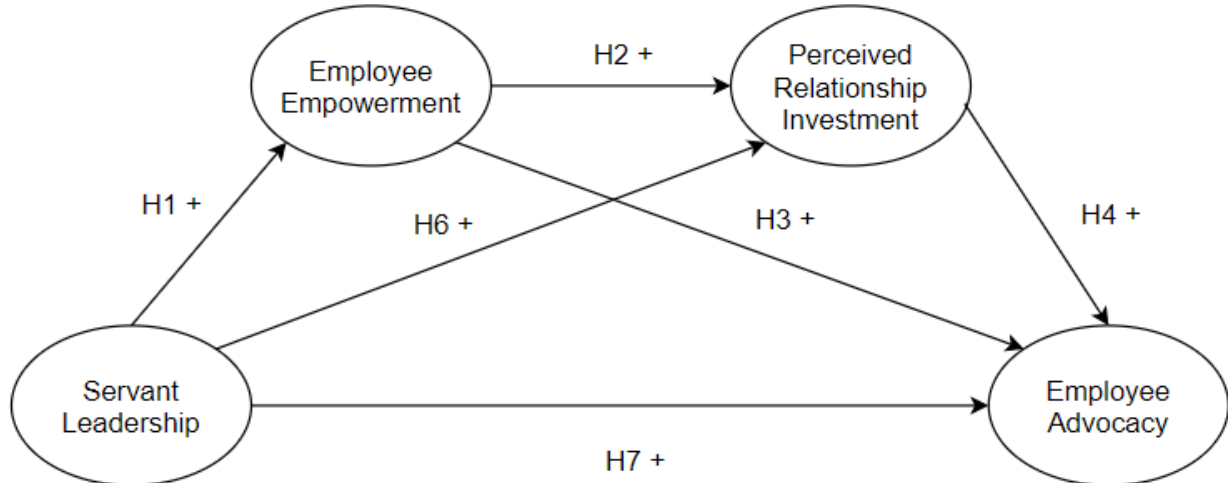


Figure 1. The conceptual model. Mediation hypotheses H5, H8, H9.

The final sample included 54.3% females and 45.4% males. The average age of participants was 41 years ($SD = 13.6$). Approximately 65.4% of participants did not hold managerial positions. Among those in management positions, 18.8% were in medium-level management, 9.8% were in lower level management, and 5.9% were in top management. Almost half of the participants (48.1%) had worked at

their current organization for at least four years. Regarding education, 56.3% of participants had at least a bachelor's degree. The mode income of the participants was \$600,001 to \$1,000,000 Chilean pesos (US\$700 to US\$1,167). Additionally, 28.3% of participants responded affirmatively when asked if their organization had ever encouraged them to say positive things about it or defend it on social media or through other communication means. Participants were also asked if their organization rewarded them for engaging in specific advocacy behaviors, and 22.1% of participants answered affirmatively. Additional demographic information is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample.

Respondent profiles	Frequency	% of sample
<i>Gender</i>	357	
Male	162	45.4
Female	194	54.3
Other	1	0.3
<i>Position</i>	356	
Nonmanagement	233	65.3
Lower level management	35	9.8
Middle-level management	67	18.8
Top management	21	5.9
<i>Education</i>	357	
Secondary education or below	29	8.1
Incomplete higher education in technical training center (CFT) or professional institute (IP)	28	7.8
Complete higher education in technical training center (CFT) or professional institute (IP)	70	19.6
Incomplete bachelor's degree	29	8.1
Bachelor's degree	149	41.7
Postgraduate degree (diploma, master's, or doctorate)	52	14.6
<i>Tenure</i>	357	
Less than one year	36	10.1
1–2 years	58	16.2
2–4 years	87	24.4
4–6 years	48	13.4
More than 6 years	124	34.7
Don't know/Not sure	4	1.1
<i>Income</i>		
\$300,000 or less (US\$350 or less)	26	7.3
\$300,001–\$600,000 (US\$350–US\$700)	97	27.2
\$600,001–\$1,000,000 (US\$700–US\$1,167)	110	30.8
\$1,000,001–\$1,500,000 (US\$1,167–US\$1,750)	68	19.0
\$1,500,001–\$2,000,000 (US\$1,750–US\$2,333)	25	7.0
\$2,000,001–\$3,000,000 (US\$2,333–US\$3,500)	20	5.6

\$3,000,001-\$5,000,000 (US\$3,500-US\$5,833)	7	2.0
\$5,000,001 or more (US\$5,833 or more)	4	1.1
<i>Industry sector</i>	357	
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	7	2.0
Automotive	2	0.6
Banking	10	2.8
Construction	5	1.4
Educational services	16	4.5
Engineering	8	2.2
Govt-federal	28	7.8
Govt-state and local	3	0.8
Healthcare services	19	5.3
Information (publishing and broadcasting)	12	3.4
Insurance and financial services	3	0.8
Leisure & hospitality	3	0.8
Manuf-consumer products	7	2.0
Manuf-industrial products	3	0.8
Mining	26	7.3
Nonprofit	42	11.8
Professional & business services	23	6.4
Real estate	9	2.5
Retail trade	3	0.8
Services (others)	7	2.0
Services-IT tech and software	13	3.6
Services-security	4	1.1
Shipping, logistic, & courier	19	5.3
Telecommunications	13	3.6
Transportation	8	2.2
Transportation	7	2.0
Wholesale trade	49	13.7
Other	8	2.2

Measures

All the adopted key constructs derived from established literature. Employee advocacy was measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all likely* (1) to *extremely likely* (7). Servant leadership, employee empowerment, and perceived relationship investment used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Servant leadership was measured with seven items adopted from Liden and associates (2015). Sample items included, "My supervisor makes my career development a priority," and "I would seek help from my leader if I had a personal problem." The reliability score for servant leadership was .88. Employee empowerment, adopted from Spreitzer (1995), consists of 12 items representing four dimensions: meaning (e.g., "The work I do is very important to me"; $\alpha = .91$),

competence (e.g., "I am confident about my ability to do my job"; $\alpha = .89$), self-determination (e.g., "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job"; $\alpha = .84$), and impact (e.g., "My impact on what happens in my department is large"; $\alpha = .85$). Perceived relationship investment was measured with three items adopted from De Wulf and colleagues (2001) ($\alpha = .93$). A sample item included, "My organization makes efforts to increase employees' loyalty." To measure employee advocacy, we used six items taken from Thelen (2019). Sample items included, "Recommend my organization's brands, products or services to others," and "Refute biased opinions about my organization." The reliability score for employee advocacy was .90. The results of the descriptive analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations, Reliability Coefficients, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Main Variables.

	SL	Meaning	Competence	Determination	Impact	PRI	Employee Advocacy
SL	.88						
Meaning	.34**	.91					
Competence	.13*	.51**	.89				
Determination	.46**	.38**	.34**	.84			
Impact	.43**	.45**	.41**	.69**	.85		
PRI	.63**	.28**	.06	.31**	.33**	.93	
Employee Advocacy	.46**	.46**	.26**	.39**	.46**	.57**	.90
<i>M</i>	4.30	6.08	6.40	5.61	5.51	4.31	5.11
<i>SD</i>	1.34	1.04	0.82	1.20	1.24	1.63	1.31

Note. SL = servant leadership; PRI = perceived relationship investment.

*Correlation is significant at $p < .05$, two-tailed.

**Correlation is significant at $p < .01$, two-tailed.

The numbers on the diagonal are reliability coefficients.

For data analysis, we conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the relationships between the multidimensional latent constructs. Preliminary regression analyses did not show that demographic variables such as organizational tenure, position, income, or educational level significantly affected the main constructs. Thus, demographic variables were not incorporated in the SEM model.

Results

We followed a two-step procedure involving the assessment of the measurement model followed by the structural model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The analysis was conducted using AMOS 24.0 software with maximum likelihood estimation. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed, and the result revealed satisfactory data-model fit: $\chi^2(340) = 734.24$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.16$, RMSEA = .057 (90% CI [.051, .063]), SRMR = .07, TLI = .942, and CFI = .942 (L. T. Hu & Bentler, 1999). Thus, we proceeded to analyze the structural model. Overall, the proposed SEM model demonstrated good fit, and the initial model was retained as the final model without modifications: $\chi^2(340) = 734.24$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.16$, RMSEA = .057 (90% CI [.051, .063]), SRMR = .07, TLI = .942, and CFI = .942. Table 3 shows all measurement items and factor loadings.

Table 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results.

Factor	Scale items	Std. loadings	S.E.
Servant Leadership	My supervisor can tell if something work-related is going wrong.	.62	.08
	My supervisor makes my career development a priority.	.82	.09
	I would seek help from my leader if I had a personal problem.	.72	.10
	My supervisor emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community.	.84	.09
	My supervisor puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.	.72	.09
	My supervisor gives me the freedom to handle difficult situations in the way that I feel is best.	.65	.09
	My supervisor would NOT compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.	.63	NA
Employee Empowerment	<i>Meaning</i>	.58	NA
	The work I do is very important to me.	.85	.04
	My job activities are personally meaningful to me.	.87	.04
	The work I do is meaningful to me.	.92	NA
	<i>Competence</i>	.48	.09
	I am confident about my ability to do my job.	.83	.06
	I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities.	.92	.06
	I have mastered the skills necessary for my job.	.81	NA
	<i>Self-determination</i>	.86	.19
	I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job.	.72	.05
	I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work.	.83	.06
	I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job.	.84	NA
	<i>Impact</i>	.89	.20
My impact on what happens in my department is large.	.66	.05	
I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department.	.88	.04	
I have significant influence over what happens in my department.	.91	NA	
Perceived Relationship Investment	My organization makes efforts to increase employees' loyalty.	.88	NA
	My organization makes various efforts to improve its tie with regular employees.	.95	.04
	My organization really cares about keeping its employees.	.88	.04
Employee Advocacy	Recommend my organization's brands, products or services to others	.69	NA
	Recommend my organization as a great place to work	.82	.09
	Refute biased opinions about my organization	.74	.09
	When applicable, I would support my organization in public policy issues that impact the business	.79	.09
	Show pride when representing my organization in public	.90	.09
	Willingly participate in volunteer work or community relation activities in which my organization is involved	.75	.09

Hypotheses Testing

Figure 2 illustrates the standardized path coefficients. H1 predicted a positive association between servant leadership and psychological empowerment. Because the results showed a positive and significant association ($\beta = .56, p < .001$), H1 was supported. However, we did not find evidence to support H2, which proposed a positive relationship between empowerment and perceived relationship investment ($\beta = .02, n.s.$). H3 and H4 predicted that employee advocacy would be positively related to psychological empowerment (H3) and relationship investment (H4). The results showed a positive relationship between employees' perceptions of empowerment and employee advocacy ($\beta = .41, p < .001$), and between PRI and employee advocacy ($\beta = .48, p < .001$), therefore supporting both hypotheses. Additionally, a bootstrapping procedure ($N = 5,000$) was conducted to examine whether perceptions of relationship investment partially mediate the effect of empowerment on employee advocacy. However, we did not find evidence to support H5 ($\beta = .01, n.s.$; 95% CI $[-.06, .08]$). H6 and H7 proposed the positive influence of servant leadership on PRI and advocacy. H6 was supported ($\beta = .68, p < .001$), indicating that servant leaders' followers are more likely to perceive that their organizations invest in resources and efforts aimed at building and maintaining relationships with them. H7 was not supported because we failed to show a direct relationship between servant leadership and employee advocacy ($\beta = .04, n.s.$). H8 and H9 predicted that PRI and psychological empowerment partially mediate servant leadership's effect on employee advocacy. The results revealed that PRI ($\beta = .27, p < .001$) and employee empowerment ($\beta = .19, p < .001$) fully mediate the effect of servant leadership on employee advocacy. Therefore, both H8 and H9 were partially supported by the data.

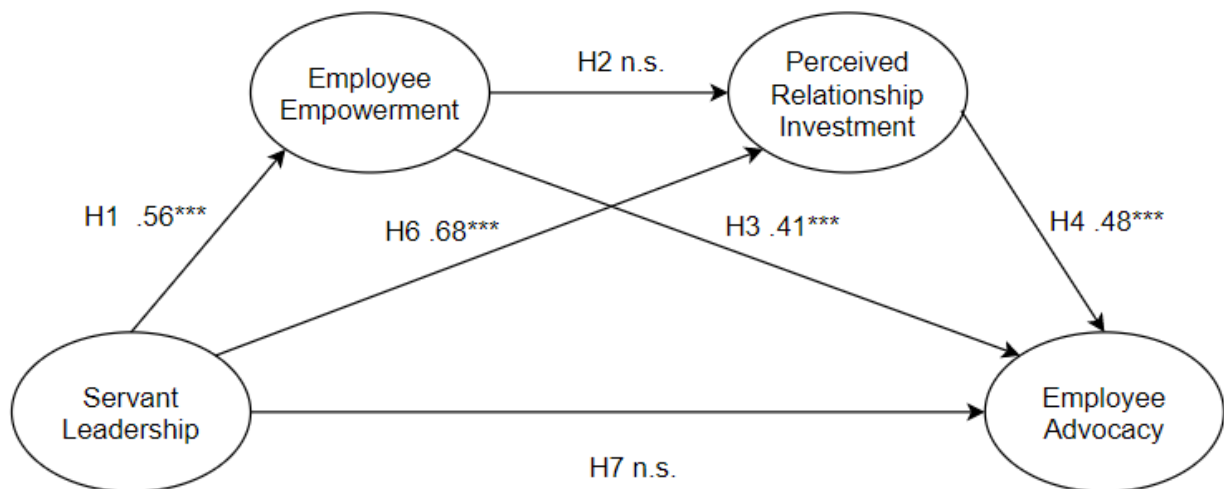


Figure 2. The hypothesized structural model with standardized path coefficients. Mediation hypotheses H5, H8, H9. * $p < .001$.**

Discussion

Servant leadership can play an essential role in the overall success of an organization. As a result of this considerable value, the current study sought to expand the body of knowledge on servant leadership, psychological empowerment, PRI, and employee advocacy. This objective was carried out by investigating servant leadership's effect on employee advocacy through the development of psychological empowerment and PRI.

Servant Leadership, Psychological Empowerment, and PRI

Psychological empowerment is an antecedent of a wide range of positive work outcomes, including innovation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and task performance (Seibert, Wang, & Courtwright, 2011). As a result of this positive impact, empowering employees has become a popular goal among organizations. Previous studies have highlighted that enabling and empowering employees is a central component of servant leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002) and that a positive relationship exists between both variables (Newman et al., 2017). The results from the investigation reinforced this relationship. This finding highlights that organizations with servant leaders are more likely to develop employees who feel empowered concerning the level of control, competence, impact, and meaning they have in their work environments (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Servant leaders set aside their self-interest and place subordinates' interests as the top priority (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Given that PRI occurs when employees sense that the organization cares about them, the current study predicted that servant leadership would have a positive relationship with PRI. The findings supported this hypothesis. Therefore, servant leadership will not only affect the relationship that supervisors have with their followers, but also will impact the extent to which employees believe that their organization is trying to build and maintain relationships with them.

Previous studies have found that employees who do not feel empowered by their employers are more likely to perceive organizational opacity; as a result, they will experience lower levels of trust (Kanagaretnam et al., 2014). Therefore, in addition to testing the relationship that servant leadership has with psychological empowerment and PRI, this study also predicted that empowerment would have a positive relationship with PRI. However, we failed to find a significant association between psychological empowerment and PRI. As a result, PRI did not mediate the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee advocacy. One plausible explanation for this result may be that employees perceive that their psychological empowerment is a result of their supervisor's work or their individual qualities, and not directly related to the organization as a whole.

Employee Advocacy as an Outcome of Servant Leadership, Psychological Empowerment, and PRI

Previous studies have found that psychological empowerment positively influences employees' OCB (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012). Additionally, researchers have emphasized that employees who find meaning in their work tend to show more commitment toward their organization (Asag-Gau & van Dierendonck, 2011). The current study advanced literature by linking psychological empowerment and employee advocacy, a

construct that is conceptually different from OCB. The results from the present investigation supported the relationship between both variables. This finding highlights that empowered employees are more likely to advocate on behalf of their organizations to both internal and external stakeholders using verbal and nonverbal manifestations. As informed by SET, PRI motivates employees and the organization to maintain a reciprocal relationship (De Wulf et al., 2001; Smith & Barclay, 1997). Employees who believe that their organization is dedicated to building long-term, quality relationships with them are more likely to repay their organization by demonstrating extra-role behaviors. Our findings supported a positive relationship between PRI and employee advocacy and indicated that PRI was the studied variable that had the strongest association with advocacy behaviors.

Servant leaders put their followers' interests first (Spears, 1995) and portray a people-centered and ethical leadership style (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007). As a result of these characteristics, researchers have found that servant leadership plays a role in increasing satisfaction and commitment levels among followers (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Mayer et al., 2008). Similarly, previous studies have suggested that followers will go beyond their formal job requirements and display OCB when servant leadership is exercised in their organizations (Ehrhart, 2004; Reed, 2015; Wang et al., 2018). Given these relationships, the current study predicted that servant leadership would have a direct effect on employee advocacy. Nevertheless, the results failed to indicate that servant leadership had a direct impact on employee advocacy. Although a direct relationship between these two variables was not found, the study found that both psychological empowerment and PRI mediated the relationship between servant leadership and employee advocacy. The mediating role of empowerment aligns with previous studies that have highlighted the role of psychological empowerment in the relationship between transformational leadership and follower work outcomes (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004). Regarding the mediating role played by PRI, the results are also aligned with a study conducted by Newman and colleagues (2017), which found that LMX mediates the relationship between servant leadership and OCB. Whereas the study conducted by Newman and associates (2017) highlights the mediating role played by the relationship between supervisors and subordinates, the current research focuses on the mediating role played by the cognitive perceptions that followers have of their organization's interest in maintaining and enhancing relationships with employees.

Conclusion

Implications

This research provides theoretical contributions to the communication and management literature. First, this study increases our understanding of employee advocacy by examining its relationship with servant leadership. Importantly, we examined the psychological and cognitive processes through which servant leaders foster positive employee behaviors. Specifically, by developing psychological empowerment and PRI, organizations with servant leaders can encourage employee advocacy. Second, this study increases our understanding of servant leadership and complements a growing body of literature on this leadership style and its impact on employees and organizations. Even though previous studies have linked servant leadership to employees' extra-role behaviors, our study was among the first to establish employee advocacy as a possible outcome. Third, over the past few decades, researchers have examined the effectiveness of public relations by using relationships as an outcome measure (e.g., Hung, 2005; Kim,

2007; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Considering the association between PRI and relationship quality, it is critical to identify different approaches that could increase PRI. The current study achieved this objective by establishing a connection between servant leadership and PRI. Furthermore, the positive association between PRI and employee advocacy suggests that employees' perceptions and beliefs matter and can be directly translated into advocacy behavior. This finding recognizes the theoretical value of PRI and complements public relations literature that largely focuses on relationship quality as an outcome rather than the perception of relationship investment as a process.

The findings of this study also have important practical implications. First, if organizations put effort into the development of servant leaders, they will boost psychological empowerment among employees, increase PRI, and raise the likelihood that employees will promote and defend the organization. To effectively train servant leaders, organizations must provide supervisors and managers with the proper tools to improve and develop a wide range of skills, such as listening, empathy, persuasion, supporting others, and self-awareness. Second, if organizations want their employees to advocate on their behalf voluntarily, they must make efforts to increase employees' loyalty and show that they are interested in developing a long-term relationship with them. Perceptions are fundamental, and leaders must show employees that they genuinely care. When employees feel valued and appreciated by their leaders, they are more likely to go above and beyond their formal responsibilities. Third, previous research has found that empowered employees are more likely to perceive organizational values as their own (Erturk, 2010). The current study found that empowered employees are also more likely to promote and defend their organization. From a public relations perspective, internal communicators can empower their employees to engage in advocacy behaviors by properly explaining how their advocacy can benefit the organization and by providing them with exciting content to share (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017; Frank, 2015). Finally, given that the current study was conducted in a Latin American country, multinational organizations can see that servant leadership generates positive outcomes in diverse cultural settings.

Limitations

This study encountered several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting its findings. First, cross-sectional SEM is limited in establishing true causal effects between variables. Second, all the measures were gathered on a single self-report survey. Therefore, common method variance may have inflated or reduced the relationships that were found between the examined variables (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Third, because the data in this study came from Chile, their generalizability to other cultural contexts may be brought into question.

Research Directions

To provide a stronger understanding of the relationship between servant leadership and the examined variables, future research may examine if this leadership style has the same effect in other countries with different cultural contexts. In addition, future studies should develop a longitudinal survey design or experiment to establish whether servant leadership enhances the development of psychological empowerment, PRI, and employee advocacy over time. Because the current study did not control for the potential effect of alternative leadership styles, future researchers may want to include alternative leadership approaches to detect the

additional variance explained by servant leadership on the examined variables. It is hoped that this study serves as an invitation for other researchers to further investigate employee advocacy. This will increase our knowledge of how to encourage this behavioral outcome among employees.

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